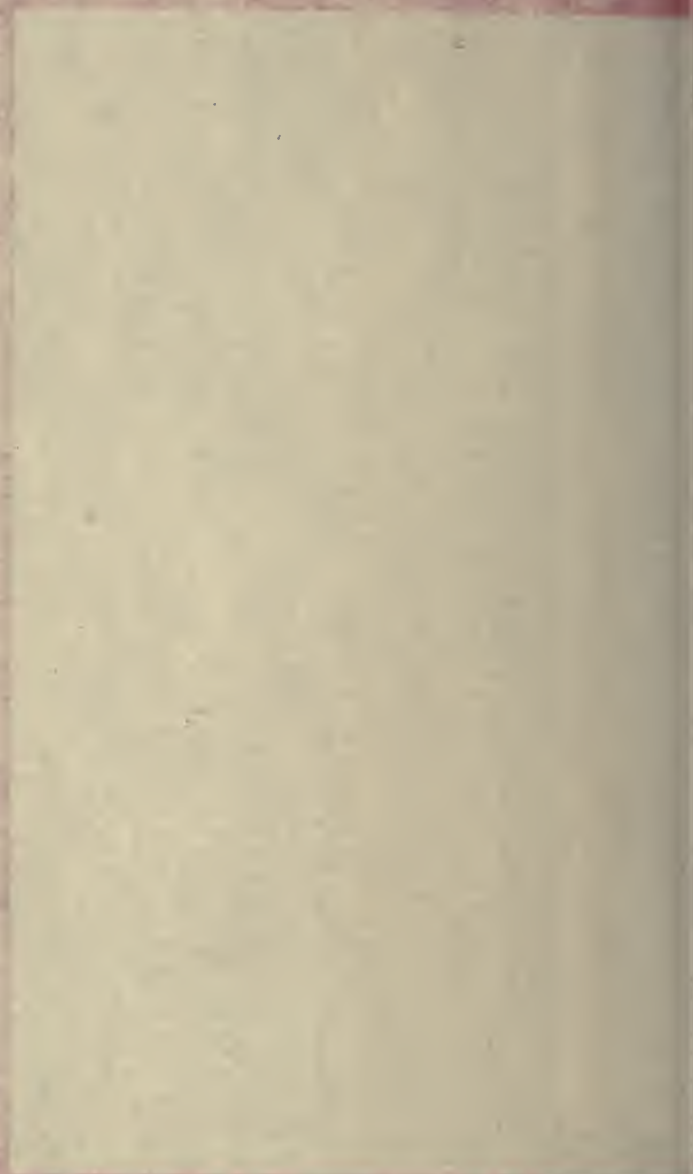




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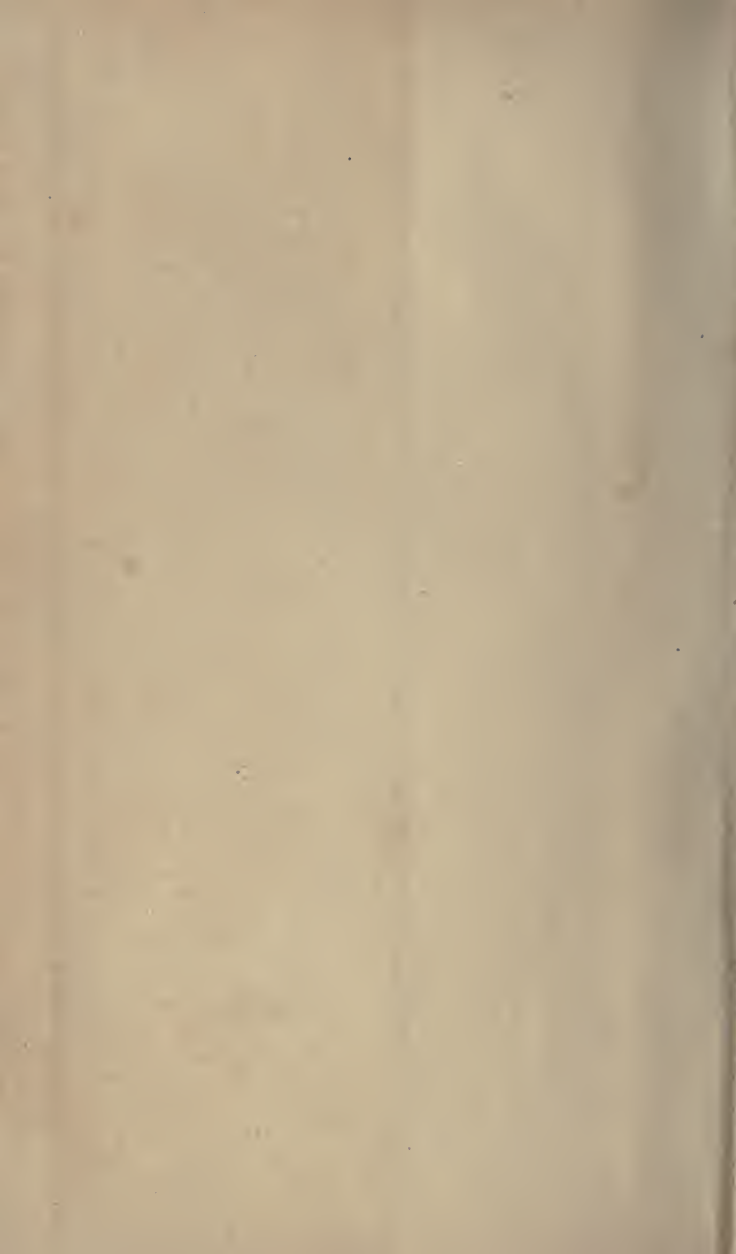
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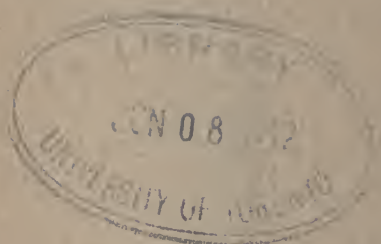
THE PIONEERS

THE
PIONEERS

BY
K. S. PRICHARD



HODDER AND STOUGHTON
LIMITED LONDON



CHAPTER I

THE wagon had come to rest among the trees an hour or two before sunset.

It was a covered-in dray, and had been brought to in a little clearing of the scrubby undergrowth. Two horses had drawn it all the way from the coast. Freed of their harness, they stood in the lee of a great gum, their flanks matted with the dust which had caked with the run of sweat on them. The mongrel that had followed at their heels lay stretched on the sward beside them. A red-dappled cow and her calf were tethered to a wheel of the wagon, and at a little distance from them were two battered crates of drooping and drowsy fowls.

On a patch of earth scraped clear of grass and leaves, the fire threw off wisps of smoke and the dry, musky incense of burning eucalyptus and dogwood. It had smouldered; and a woman, stooping beside it, was feeding it with branches of brushwood and sticks that she broke in her hands or across her knees.

A man was busy in the interior of the wagon, moving heavy casks and pieces of furniture. He lifted them out, piled them on the ground and spread a couple of sheepskins over them. Then he threw a sheepskin and a blanket of black and brown tweed on the floor for the night's resting.

It had been climbing the foothills for days, this heavy, old-fashioned vehicle, and the man and the woman had climbed with it, she driving the cow and calf, he giving his attention to the horses and clearing the track. So slowly had it toiled along that at a little distance it looked like some weary, indefatigable insect creeping among the trees. The horses—a sturdy young sandy-grey mare and a raw, weedy, weather-worn bay—seemed as much part of it as its wooden frame, ironshod wheels, and awning of grimy sailcloth.

They tugged at their load with dull, dumb patience and obstinacy, although the bay had stumbled rather badly the whole way. The man had put his shoulder to the wheel, helping the horses up the steep banks and long, slippery sidings. He had stood trembling and sweating with them when heavy places in the road were past, the veins knotted in his swarthy forehead, the bare column of his throat gasping for the mountain air. There was the same toiling faculty in him that there was in the horses—an instinct to overcome all difficulties by exertion of the muscles of his back.

The wagon had creaked garrulously on the long slopes, and stuttered and groaned up the steep hill sides. It had forded creeks, the horses splashing soberly through them and sending the spray into the air on either side. It had crashed over the undergrowth that encroached on the track, an ill-blazed stock route among the trees, and again and again the man had been obliged to haul aside fallen timber, or burn it where it lay, and cut away saplings, in order to make a new path.

The wagon was filled with boxes and bags of food stuffs and pieces of furniture. Inside it smelt like a grocer's shop; and it had trailed the mingled odour of meal, corned meat, hemp, iron, seed wheat, crude oil

and potatoes through the virgin purity of the forest air. Beneath its floor, in wrappings of torn bags, straw and hessian, were lashed a wooden plough, a broad-bladed shovel, and half a dozen farming and carpentering tools. The fowls—a game rooster, a buff hen and a speckled pullet—hung in wicker baskets from wooden pegs at the back. They and the cow and her calf had wakened strange echoes in the forest, the rooster heralding every morning at dawn this advance guard of civilisation.

When the vehicle had reached the summit of the foothills, the track fell wavering into the green depths of the forest behind it, a wale of broken ferns, slain saplings, blue gums and myrtles, mown down as with a scythe by its wheels. The timbered hills fell away, wave upon wave, into the mists of the distance, and the plains stretched outward from them to the faintly glittering line the sea made on the dim horizon. Somewhere to the west on those grey plains, against the shore of an inlet, was the township of Port Southern from which they had come.

Donald Cameron, after studying a roughly-made plan and the wall of the forest about him, had taken the mare by her sandy forelock and turned the wagon in among the trees on the far side of a giant gum, blazed with a cross, on which the congealing sap had dried like blood. Steering a north-westerly course, the wagon had tacked among the trees and come to the clearing.

And now that all preparations for the night were made, he took the animals to the creek for water. It ran at the foot of the long, low hillside and could be heard crooning and gurgling under the leafy murmur of the forest.

Leaving the fire, the woman went to a fallen trunk, sat down and gazed into the shadows gathering among

the trees. A rosy and saffron mist hung between their thronging boles. The peace of the after-glow held the hills, the chirring of insects and the shrill sweet calling of birds had quivered into silence. Only a leafy whispering stirred the quiet.

For a moment the fire of her clear spirit burnt low. Hope and courage were lost in dreams. There was wistfulness in her grey eyes as they went out before her, wistfulness and heartache. She seemed to be reading the scroll of the future, seeing a dim, mysterious unrolling of joys and sorrows with the eyes of her inner vision.

The sun had set when Cameron returned. He tethered the cow to the wheel of the wagon and clamped rusty hobbles about the horses' fetlocks. Then he looked towards the woman.

"Mary!" he called.

She did not hear, and he walked towards her.

A man of few words, Cameron did not speak as he searched his wife's face.

"I—I was dreaming," she said, looking up, startled at the sight of him.

"You're not grieving?" he asked.

There was a tremor in his voice, though its roughness almost covered that.

"No, not grieving," she said. "But thinking what it will be to us and our children, by and by, in this place. It is a new country and a new people we're making, they said at home, and I'm realising what they meant now."

"Aye. But it's a fine country!"

Cameron's eyes travelled the length of the clearing, over the slope of the hill. They took in the silent world of the trees, the rosy mist that still glowed between their slender, thronging stems. There was pride and an expression of sated hunger in his glance.

"It's all ours, this land about here," he said.

"Yes?"

Her eyes wandered too.

"I have worked all my days, till now," he said, reviving a bitter memory, "without so much as a plot of sour earth as big as y're handkerchief to call my own. Worked for other men, sweated the body and soul out of me . . . and now, this is mine . . . all this . . . hundred acres . . . and more when I'm ready for it, more, and more, and more. . . ."

He paused a moment, all the emotion in him stirred and surging. Then, with a short-drawn breath that dismissed the past and dedicated thought and energy to the future, he went on:

"I marked this place when I came through to the Port with Middleton's cattle, last year. I'll run cattle—but I want to clear and cultivate too. Up there where there are trees now will be ploughed fields and an orchard soon. The house and barns 'll be on the brow of the hill. By and by . . . we shall have a name and a place in the country."

His wife's eyes were on his face. He had spoken as though he were taking an oath.

"No doubt it will be as you say, Donald," she said, with a faint sigh. "But it is a strange lonely land, indeed, without the sight of a roof in all the long miles we have come by. Never the sound of a human voice, or the lowing of cattle."

Donald Cameron did not reply. He was envisaging his schemes for the future. Not a man given to dreams, the thoughtful mood had taken him; his breath came and went in steady draughts. His face was set to the mould of his musing; there was determination in every line of it. A gloomy face it was, rough-cast, with deep set eyes.

His wife's words and the sigh that went with them were repeated in a remote brain cell.

"You should be giving thanks, not complaining," he said, his gaze returning to her. "We must do that now—give thanks for the journey accomplished."

And, as if it were the last duty of a well-spent day, he knelt on the grassy earth, and Mary knelt beside him.

Donald Cameron addressed his God as man speaks to man; yet his voice had a vibrating note as he prayed.

"O Lord," he said, "we thank Thee for having brought us in safety to our new home. We thank Thee for having brought us over the sea, through the storms and the troubles on the ship when there was nothing to eat but weevily biscuits, and the water stank, and there was like to be mutiny with the men in the chained gangs. We—we thank Thee, this woman and I. She is a good woman for a man to have with him when he goes to the ends of the earth to carve out a name and a place for himself."

He paused thoughtfully for a moment; and then went on:

"I have said all that before; but I have been thinking that it would do no harm to say it again now that we are ready to begin the new life, and will need all Thy help and protection, Lord. We thank Thee for having brought us all the miles from the coast, and the beasts and the wagon, in safety—though the bay horse I bought of Middleton's storekeeper is turning out badly. He was a poor bargain at the best of it—weak in the knee and spring-halted. Do Thou have a care of him, Lord. It will be a big loss to me if he is no use . . . with all the clearing and carting there will be to do soon."

He talked a little longer to the Almighty, asking no favour, but intimating that he expected to be justly dealt by as he himself dealt by all men. In the matter

of the bay, he said that he did not think a God-fearing man had been treated quite as well as, under the circumstances, he might have been; but he imputed no blame—except to Middleton's storekeeper—and gave thanks again.

A man of middle height, squarely built, Donald Cameron had the loosely slung frame of a farm labourer. The woman beside him, although her clothes were as poor and heavy as his, was more finely and delicately made. The hands clasped before her were long and slender.

The prayer ended, they rose from the grass. Cameron's eyes covered his wife. A gust of tenderness swept him.

"There was not what you might call much sentiment about our mating," he said. "But I doubt not it has come, Mary."

"Yes, Donald." Her clear eyes were lifted to his. "May I be a true and faithful wife to you."

"Y're not regretting at the long journey's end?" he asked.

"It's not that"—a sigh went from her—"but that I'm not worthy of you."

"Whist," he said. "You're my woman—my wife. It's all done with, the past."

CHAPTER II

A FEW months later Mary Cameron's voice, as she sang lullabys to her baby, mingled with the forest murmur and the sounds that came from the clearing—the lowing of the cow, the clucking and cackle of fowls, the clang of Donald's axe as he ring-barked trees near the house.

A one-roomed hut, built of long, rough-barked saplings, ranged one above the other, and thatched with coarse reddish-brown bark, laid on in slabs, it stood on the brow of the hill not far from the wagon's first resting place. Its two doors, set opposite each other, opened, one towards the back hills and the other towards the creek and the cleared land on which a stubble of stumps still stood. The walls of the hut, inside, were plastered with the clayey hill soil which Mary had rammed into crevices between the saplings when daylight had at first showed in thin shining streaks, and the mountain breezes had crept chilly through them in the early mornings. She had made the floor of beaten clay too, and had gathered from the creek bed the grey and brown stones which Donald had built into the hearth and chimney with seams of lime and fine white sand that he had brought from the Port.

A window space had been left in the wall fronting the clearing; but there was no glass in it. At night, or when it rained, Mary hung a piece of hessian over the window. Two chairs were the only ready-made furniture of the room. The boxes and bales brought in the wagon were piled in a corner. A table, made of

box-covers with sapling legs driven into the floor, was under the window, and a bed, on a wooden foundation strapped with green-hide, stood against the back wall. A few pieces of delf and white crockery glimmered on a shelf near the open fireplace, and below them, on another shelf, were stone jars and two or three pots and pans.

Donald's harness, saddle, stirrup-leathers and stock-whip hung on pegs near the back door. Among the bales and boxes, under a dingy muffling cloth, stood a spinning wheel, and, tied together with lengths of dusty yarn, the parts of a weaver's hand loom which Mary had brought from the old country. On Sundays, when a bright fire sparkled on the hearth, the mats of frayed hessian were spread on the floor, and she had put a jar filled with wild flowers on the table, her eyes brimmed with joy and tenderness as she gazed about her.

She had toiled all the summer out of doors with her husband to make their home, timber-cutting with him, grubbing stumps from the land, laying twigs and leaves in the stumps and lighting them so that the slow fires eating the wood left only charred shells to clear away. She had driven Lassie, the grey, backwards and forwards, drawing logs and tree trunks from the slope to the stack behind the house, and when the frames of the wagon shed, cow sheds and stable were up, had laced the brush-wood to them. The weedy, brown nag that was Lassie's trace mate, during those first weeks in the hills had come down and got himself rather badly staked, and Donald had had to shoot him. It cost him a good deal to fire that shot, but he had worked the harder for it.

Mary watched the cow while she browsed on the edge of the forest before a paddock on the top of the hill was fenced. She milked, fed the calf and the fowls, and carried water from the creek to the house. When she

was not doing any of these things, or baking, brushing or furbishing indoors, during those first few months, her fingers were busy with little garments—shirts and gowns and overalls—cut from her own clothes of homespun tweed and unbleached calico.

It was at the end of a long golden day that a cry from her brought Donald from the far edge of the clearing. He was turning the land for his first crop, and when he heard that cry, left the mare in her tracks, the rope lines trailing beside her.

Later, his hands trembling, he took Lassie from the plough, and led her to the creek for water. Then, although the sun had not set, he hobbled her for the night, went into the house and shut the door.

Usually, all was silent within its walls when the darkness fell; but this night a garish light flickered under the door. There were sounds of hushed movement, faint moaning, the crackling of fire on the hearth, all night. The dog lying on the mat by the door did not know what to make of it. He growled, low and warningly now and then. Towards morning while stars still sparkled over the dark wave of the forest, a faintly wailing cry came from the hut. The dog's ears twitched; his yelping had an eerie note.

Sunlight was flooding the hills, illumining the forest greenery, making crimson and gold of the shoots on the saplings, banishing the mists among the trees, splashing in long shafts on the sward, wet with dew, when Donald Cameron opened the door. His arms were folded round a shawled bundle. He stood for a moment in the doorway, the sunlight beating past him into the hut.

Then he lifted the small body in his arms, kissed it, and held it out to the dawn, his face wrung with emotion.

"All this, yours—your world, my son!" he said.

They were quiet days that followed, days spun off in lengths of sunshine from the looms of Time, with the sleepy warmth of the end of the summer and the musky odours of the forest in them. Mary worked less out of doors when she was about again; her hands were full, cooking, washing and sewing, and looking after the animals and the baby. She sang to him as she worked. All her joy and tenderness were centred in him now.

Donald did not understand the love songs she sang to little Davey. They were always in her own Welsh tongue.

"It's queer talk to make to a bairn," he said one day, smiling grimly, as he listened to her.

"He understands it, I'm sure," she said, smiling too.

Cameron sang himself sometimes when he was at the far end of the clearing. It was always the same thing—the gathering song of the Clan of Donald the Black. While he was ploughing one morning, Mary first heard him singing:

Pibroch o' Donuil Dhu,
Pibroch o' Donuil,
Wake thy wild voice anew,
Summon Clan Conuil.

The words of the grand old slogan echoed among the hills.

When next she heard it, Mary lifted Davey out of his cradle and ran to the door with him, crying happily:

"Listen, now, Davey dear, to thy father singing!"

Cameron had interrupted himself to call to the mare as she turned a furrow: "Whoa, Lass! Whoa now!"

He had gone on with his song as he bent the share to the slope of the hill again.

A hidden root checked his progress ; but when he had got it out of the way, and the plough settled again, he swung down hill, giving his voice to the wind heartily :

Leave untended the herd,
The flock without shelter ;
Leave the corpse uninterred,
The bride at the altar.

Leave the deer, leave the steer,
Leave nets and barges ;
Come in your fighting gear,
Broad swords and t—a—r—ges.

His voice had not much music, but Mary loved the way he sang, with the fierceness and burr, the rumble on the last word, of a chieftain calling his men to battle. It was almost as if he were calling his tribesmen to help him in the battle he had on hand. But he was as shamefaced as a schoolboy about his singing, and it was only when he was some distance from the house, and had forgotten himself in his work, that he gave expression to the deep-seated joy and satisfaction with life that were in him.

Davey was four months old, and the paddock his father had been ploughing the day he was born was green with the blades of its first crop, when Mary asked :

“ When will you be going back to the Port, Donald ? ”

She had taken Cameron's tea to him where he was working among the trees a little way from the clearing. He was resting for a few minutes, sitting on a log with his axe beside him.

She spoke quietly as if it were an ordinary enough question she had asked. Her eyes sought his.

“There’s very little flour left, and only a small piece of corned meat.”

“I’d made up my mind to go, day after to-morrow,” he said.

CHAPTER III

THIS journey to Port Southern for stores meant that Mary would have to remain alone in the hills until her husband returned. The cow and calf had to be fed and looked after. They were valuable possessions, and could not be left for fear they might wander away from the clearing and get lost in the scrub. Besides, there were the fowls to feed, and the crop to guard from the shy, bright-eyed, wild creatures, that already, lopping out of the forest at dawn, had nibbled it down in places.

Cameron's eyes lingered on his wife as he answered her question. She stood bareheaded before him, the afternoon sunlight outlining her figure and setting threads of gold in her hair. The coming of the child had made her vaguely dearer to him. This journey had not been mentioned between them since Davey's birth. He had tried to put off making it, ekeing out their dwindling supply of corned meat by shooting the brown wallabys which came out of the trees on the edge of the clearing, surprised at the sight of strange, two-legged and four-legged creatures.

They, and the little grey furry animals that scurried high on the branches of the trees on moonlight nights, made very good food. Donald Cameron had been told that no man need starve in the hills while he had a gun, and there were 'possums in the trees. But neither he nor Mary liked the strong flavour of 'possum flesh, tasting

as it did, of the pungent eucalyptus buds and leaves the little creatures lived on. He shot the 'possums for the sake of their skins though, spread and tacked the grey pelts against the wall of the house, and when the sun had dried them, Mary stitched them into a rug. She had lined Davey's cradle with them, too.

Donald made ready for his journey next day. During the morning he took his gun down from the shelf above the door, cleaned it, and called his wife out of doors. He showed her how to use it and made her take aim at a tall tree at the end of the clearing.

"You must have no fires or light in the place after sundown," he said, "and let the grub fires in the stumps die out. Bar the doors at night. And if blacks, or a white man sets foot in the hut y've the gun. And must use it! Don't hesitate. It's the law in this country—self-defence. Every man for himself and a woman is doubly justified. You understand."

"Yes, of course," she answered.

"And I'll leave you the dog," he went on. "He's a good watch and'll give warning if there's any danger about."

"Yes," she said.

When the morning came she went to the track in the wagon with him, carrying Davey. She got down when they reached the track; he kissed her and the child, and turned his back on them silently.

She stood watching the wagon go along the path they had come by from the Port, until its roof dipped out of sight over the crest of the hill; then she went slowly back along the threadlike path among the trees.

A white-winged bird flapped across her path; already fear of the stillness was upon her. When she reached the break in the trees and the clearing was visible, the

hut on the brow of the hill had an alien aspect. The air was empty without the sound of Donald's axe clanging in the distance, or of his voice calling Lassie.

She was glad when Davey began to cry fretfully. But she could not sing to him. She tried, and her voice wavered and broke. Every other murmur in the stillness was subdued to listen to it.

The day seemed endless. At last night came. She closed and barred the door of the hut at sunset, glancing towards the shelf where Donald had put his gun. The firelight flickered and gleamed on its polished barrel.

Kneeling by the hearth she tried to pray. But her thoughts were flying in an incoherent flight like scattered birds. Davey slept peacefully on the bed among the grey 'possum furs she had wrapped round him. She watched him sleeping for awhile, and then undressing noiselessly, lay down beside him.

She did not sleep, but lay listening to every sound. The creak of the wood of the house, the panting of the wind about it, far-away sounds among the trees, the shrill cry of a night creature, every stir and rustle, until the pale light of early dawn crept under the door, and she knew that it was day again.

While she was busy in the morning she was unconscious of the world about her, or the flight of the day, but when her work was done and she stood in the doorway at noon, the silence struck her again.

All the long day there was a faint busy hum of insects in the air. It came from the grass, from the trees—the long tasselled branches of downy honey-sweet, white blossoms that hung from them. Yet this ceaseless chirring of insects, the leafy murmuring of the trees, twittering

of birds in the brushwood, the murmuring of the wind in distant valleys, the intermittent crooning and drone of the creek—all the faint, sweet, earth voices dropped into the great quiet that brooded over the place as they might have into a mysterious ocean that absorbed and obliterated all sounds. The bright hours were rent by the momentary screeching and chatter of parroquets, as they flew, spreading the red, green and yellow of their breasts against the blue sky. At sunset and dawn there were merry melodious flutings, long, sweet, mating-calls, carollings and bursts of husky, gnomish laughter. Yet the silence remained, hovering and swallowing insatiably every sound.

She gazed at the wilderness of the trees about her. From the hill on which the cow paddock was she could see only the clearing and trees—trees standing in a green and undulating sea in every direction, clothing the hills so that they seemed no more than a dark moss clinging close to their sides. In the distance they took on all the misty shades of grey and blue, or stood purple, steeped in shadows, under a rain cloud. She remembered how she had wondered what their mystery contained for her when she had first seen them on the edge of the plains, and she and Donald had set their faces towards them.

She looked down on the child in her arms, and realised that they had brought him to her; from him, her eyes went to the brown roof of the hut with its back to the hillside, a thread of smoke curling from its brown and grey chimney, and to the stretches of dark, upturned earth before it. They had brought her this too, all the dear homeness of it, and a sense of peace and consolation filled her heart.

To throw off the spell of the silence she decided that she

must work again. But what to do? Donald had said no fires were to be lit in the stumps because the smoke might attract wayfarers on the road, or wandering natives to the clearing. She sang to the child, fitfully, softly. Then, remembering the spinning wheel which stood in its muffling cloths against the wall in the hut, she brought it into the sunshine and laid Davey down on a shawl at her feet.

When she had a slender thread of yarn going and the spinning wheel began its familiar, communicative little click-clatter, her mind was set to old themes. She forgot place and time as her fingers pursued their familiar track. A gay little air went fluttering moth-wise over her lips to the accompaniment of the wheel, and the little tap tapping of its treadles. She glanced at the child every now and then, laughing and telling him that his mother had found the wherewithal to keep her busy and gay, as a bonny baby's mother ought to be, and that the song she was singing was a song that the women sang over their spinning wheels in the dear country that she had come from, far across the sea.

But the shadows fell quickly. The birds were calling, long and warningly, when she carried the wheel indoors, and busied herself for the evening milking.

Wherever she went the dog that had come from the Port with them, followed. He trailed in her footsteps when she went to the creek for water, or to the cow paddock. He lay with watchful eyes on the edge of the clearing, when she sat at her spinning in the afternoon, or walked backwards and forwards crooning Davey to sleep.

At about noon on the fourth day while she was making porridge for her midday meal, the dog started to his feet and barked furiously. He had been lying stretched

on the mat in the doorway. For a moment her heart stood still. Then she went to the door.

"What is it, Jo?" she asked.

The dog's eyes were fixed on the trees and scrubby undergrowth to the left of the hut. Every short hair on his lean body bristled. He growled sullenly. Later in the afternoon, when she sat in the clearing spinning and singing with Davey on his shawl beside her, he started to his feet suddenly and snarled fiercely.

Mary looked at him again questioningly and her eyes flew to the edge of the trees in the direction he pointed. No quivering leaf nor threatening sound stirred the quiet. He subsided at her feet after a moment, but his ears, kept pricked, twitched uneasily; his eyes never left the edge of the trees. Once they twisted up to her and she read in them the clear expression of a pitiful uneasiness, the assurance of deathless fidelity, a prayer almost to go into the house.

She picked up the child and walked towards the hut. The dog followed, glancing uneasily towards the edge of the clearing. She shut the door on that side of the hut and went to the back door.

"Jo! Jo!" she called long and clearly.

He flew round to her.

Though her limbs trembled, Mary went up to the paddock and brought the cow down to the shed. She milked, with Davey on her knees and the dog crouched beside her; then, with the child on one arm and the milk pail on the other, she went towards the house again.

She did not go down to the creek for water as she usually did.

"It's not because I'm afraid, Davey," she murmured, "but Jo would not have barked like that for nothing.

It was a warning, and it would not be nice of us to take no notice of him at all."

As she left the shed the dog darted savagely away. She did not notice that he was no longer at her heels until she had re-entered the hut. As she was going to call him, the words died on her lips. Two gaunt and ragged men stood in the doorway !

CHAPTER IV

MARY stood back from the threshold. The fear that had haunted her for days had suddenly left her.

At first glance she had seen that the men had rough pieces of wood in their hands. Her gaze was arrested by the taller, shaggier man who had sprung forward. He was about to speak roughly, breathlessly; but she anticipated him. Her eyes flew past him to the man who hung in his shadow. The gash of a wound was just visible under a grimy piece of rag wrapped across his forehead.

"He's hurt!" she cried, a sure instinct of protection urging her. "Come in, and I'll bind up your head. It wants water and a clean bandage. Oh, but you look starving, both of you! Have you lost your way in the hills? It's terrible to do that! But you're welcome indeed. Come in and have something to eat and rest yourselves."

The tall man hung in the doorway as though speech and reason had deserted him. But the other, whose thatch of reddish hair stood up strangely from the filthy rag that bound his forehead, raised his arm and took a step forward, the glare of madness in his eyes. But that movement was the last spurt of energy in him. He pitched forward and lay across the threshold.

"Oh, bring him in and put him on the bed there, and I'll try and do something for him," Mary cried, her eyes flying from the fallen body to the man who stood in the doorway.

He did as she asked and turned to her with watchful eyes.

"You hold the child for me while I bathe his head," she said, "it may bring him to."

She thrust Davey into his arms.

"Sit down, won't you?" she asked, smiling towards him, as she set some water on the fire and poured some more into a basin.

She tore up a piece of old linen and began very gently to bathe the unconscious man's head. He groaned as the pain stirred again. She spoke to him, saying that the wound would mend the sooner for being cleansed, and that it was a wonder he was alive at all with the state it was in. Sitting in Donald's chair, holding Davey in his arms, tightly, clumsily, the tall man watched her; his face turned to, and from her, as his eyes wandered apprehensively about the hut, and to the door.

"Here, ma'am," he said at last, snarling over the words, "where's your man? I've no notion for him to come in and corner us if that's your game."

"He's away," she replied, "and will not be back—perhaps for a day or two."

He stared at her.

"I should never have thought Davey would be so good with a stranger," she added, her eyes travelling from Davey's round head on his arm to the man's dark face, and the eyes that leapt and glittered in it. She smiled into them.

Davey was crooning and gurgling. He had crooked his little hands into the stranger's beard, and his mother saw with joy that the stranger held his head as though he feared to dislodge those little hands.

"No games, ma'am," he growled, "or it'll be the worse for you. We're desperate men. It's our lives we're fighting for."

"I knew that when I saw you," she said quietly.

She put some bread on the table, a mug of milk and a piece of cold meat.

"It is not much to offer you, but it is all I've got," she said. "I wish it were better, because you're wanting good wholesome food just now. I'll make some gruel for your friend and maybe there'll be an egg to-morrow, or I can set snares for a 'possum."

She took Davey from him and he turned to the table to eat. The man on the bed moaned wearily. She put Davey into his basket, lined with furry skins, and went to the sick man. The cloths that she had put over it to soak off the filthy rag which bound his head had served their purpose. She lifted them and the festering gash on his forehead was laid bare.

Her exclamation, or a twinge of pain as the air touched the wound, sharpened his brain. His eyes opened. He stared with semi-conscious gaze a moment. Then with a hoarse oath he sprang at her. His quivering lean fingers gripped her throat and clung tenaciously. The man at the table flung himself upon him and wrenched his hands away; they struggled for a moment, then the sick man dropped on to the bed again; but he shouted incoherently, his fever-bright eyes baleful by the flickering firelight.

"After the gaols, 'n the sea, 'n the bush, to be taken now and like this, by God—" he panted. "Let me be! Let me be, don't you see it's a trap!"

"It's all right," the other gasped. "Don't let your tongue run away with you, Steve."

"I'll not be taken alive," the man on the bed cried. "Not now, not after getting through so far, I'll not be taken alive, 'n the one that tries to take me'll not live either."

The tall man cursed beneath his breath.

"The woman means no harm to you," he said.

"It is the fever troubling him," Mary explained.

The sick man was already weak again. He lay on the bed limply and muttering uneasily.

"You'd best hold him so as I can put on the clean rags," she said.

She had a length of old linen, smeared with ointment from a small earthenware jar, in her hands. She laid it over the wound and gently and firmly bound it into place.

"That'll be better," she murmured.

The gaunt man overlooked her, a curious cynical humour in his eyes.

"You're a brave woman," he said.

"I'm not, indeed," she replied; but her eyes met his squarely.

She laughed softly, and told him how afraid she had been earlier in the day.

At the sound of his mother's voice, Davey piped, wistfully. She went over to him and rocked his cradle for a moment or two.

"Hush, Davey," she said talking to him softly in her native Welsh. "We have company. There's one hungry man wants his supper, and another man, sick, that thy mother must make gruel for. Do thou sing to thyself, son, till mother is ready to take thee again."

But Davey had no great notion of the laws of hospitality that separated him from the source of all consolation. He wailed incontinently and from wailing took to uttering his protest with all the strength that was in him.

The unkempt stranger munching his dry bread by the table, glanced furtively at Mary's back as she stooped over the fire stirring the gruel; then he got up and went to the cradle. He lifted the child with awkward carefulness. Davey continued to wail, nevertheless, finding that it was not the soft covering of his mother's breast that

he was laid against, but a harsh fabric, smelling of the sea, the earth, dank leaves and a strange personality.

When she took the gruel from the fire and poured it into a little bowl, her eyes rested on the stranger as he tried to appease Davey.

He was cradling the child in his arms, and muttering awkwardly, distressfully: "There now! There!" An expression of awe and reflectiveness veiled the sharpness of his features. "There now! There then!" he kept saying.

He looked up to find Davey's mother's eyes resting on him and laughed a little shamefacedly.

"I think he's forgetting his company manners, surely," he said.

"You're the first company he's had to practise on," she replied.

Her simplicity, and again the clear, shining eyes with their direct and smiling glance astounded him.

"You'd best give this to your friend, yourself," she went on, putting the bowl on the table. "It seems to trouble him to see a strange face."

She lifted Davey from the stranger's arms and he took the bowl of gruel to the other man.

"Be gentle with him and humour him," she warned, "but make him eat all of it. I'll put a blanket here on the hearth for you, and Davey and I will sleep at the other end of the room."

When she had thrown all the spare clothing in the hut on the floor before the fire and had spread a patchwork quilt and the rug of 'possum skins at the far end of the room for herself, she sat down on a low stool near the door and lifted Davey's lips to her breast. She sang a half-whispering lullaby, rocking him in her arms. His cries ceased; her thoughts went off into a dreamy psalm of thanksgiving as his soft mouth pulled at her breast.

She looked up to find the eyes of the tall stranger on her.

A gaunt, long-limbed man, his clothes hung on his arms and legs as if they were the wooden limbs of a scarecrow. The shreds were knotted and tied together, and showed bare, shrunken shanks and shins, burnt and cut about, the dark hair of virility thick on them. His face, lean and leathern, had a curious expression of hunger. The eyes in it held dark memories, yet a glitter of the sun.

Mary Cameron vaguely realised that she had known what manner of man this was the moment she looked into his eyes. That was why she had not been afraid when he confronted her on the doorstep; why, too, she had been able to ask him into her house and treat him as an unexpected, but not unwelcome guest.

The man on the bed moaned. Suddenly he started up with a shrill scream.

"A wave! A wave! We'll be swamped."

His voice fell away, muttering. Then again he was crying:

"Is that the land, Dan, that line against the sky over there? No, don't y' see there—there, man. God! Don't say it isn't! How long have we been in this boat? Seems years . . . been seein' the sea, them blasted little blue waves jumpin' up 'n lickin' my face! Better throw me overboard, Dan. Dan? Better throw me overboard . . . can't stand it any longer. The thirst and the pain in me head, Dan."

Mary turned pitiful eyes on him, rocking Davey and hushing him gently, as he wakened and began to cry querulously.

"A sail!" the sick man shouted. "Some blasted clipper for the Port, d'y' think she'll see us, Dan? Are we too far away? Will the waves hide us?"

He sank back wearily, muttering again.

"I'll not be caught . . . not be taken alive, Dan."

He started up crying angrily. "I'd rather go to hell than back. A-u-gh!"

A shriek that curdled the blood in her veins, a cry that sped upwards in an uncurling scream of uncontrollable anguish, flew from the sick man. Another and another.

Mary looked at the man before her questioningly.

The lines about his nose were bent to a faint and bitter smile; but there was no smile in his eyes.

"Thinks he's being flogged," he said. "He would be if we were caught—taken back again. You know where we came from?"

"Yes," she said.

"From the Island," his head was jerked in the direction of the sea. "You're the first soul I've spoken to since we escaped except him, and he's been raving mad most of the time. You and I've got to do some talking, ma'am."

He looked about the room, lifted Donald's chair and set it before her. He had recovered his self-possession, was readjusting his plans.

"Yes?" she said.

"You know, we meant to get all the food and clothes we wanted from this hut," he said harshly. "We watched you all day from the trees and thought a man would be coming home after sundown. We didn't mean to let you off if you screamed and brought him before we'd got what we wanted. . . . The dog's dead. Did you know? I killed him, caught him by the throat behind the shed?"

"But that was a pity!" she cried, a note of distress in her voice.

"Pity?" He leaned forward. "But we can't afford to have pity. I saw you sitting spinning in the sun, singing to the child. My heart turned in me to see you like the women at home. But that would not have saved you. Starving men, fighting for our lives we were.

Wild beasts. Pity? What pity's been shown to us? Do y' know what it means to have felt the lash, and made your escape from Port Arthur, swimming the bay at Eaglehawks' Neck, wrapped in kelp, cheating the blood-hounds chained a few yards from each other across the Neck, and the sentry who'd shoot you like a dog if he saw you? Do y' know what it was like, crawling from one end of the Island to the other in the bush at night with only a native to guide you . . . not knowing whether he was going to spear you, or run you into the tribe . . . making your way in a cockle-shell of a boat in the open sea without any mariner's tools at all, and only a keg of water and a bit of 'possum skin to chew to keep the life in you?

"No, you don't know! How could you?" He paused a moment, and continued desperately: "And it's no good my trying to tell you; Steve got a crack on his head the night we escaped. He was mad with thirst in the boat. I was near it myself . . . and I had all the work to do, pulling and straining my eyes for the land. We had to keep out of sight of other boats too, and the Government sloop going between Port Southern and Hobart Town, for fear we'd be seen, picked up and sent back. Months of scheming it took to get so far! I'd picked up the lay of the land near the Port and the way to get about in the country beyond, from sailors. It was a man who'd got as far as the coast and had been sent back told me to look for the muddy river-water in the sea and get up the river at night. We wanted to make the Wirree because there is a man—lives near the river—we'd heard would give us food and shelter, or help us to get away to the hills.

"We got to the river and had to lie low in the bush all day till night came again. Then I went up through the trees to a wooden house we could see among other

houses that were all mud, or mud and stones. It was McNab's shanty. We'd got a sailor to take a letter through to him, saying we were coming and to be on the look out for us. And I'd got a message from McNab telling us how to get to him, what sort of man he was to look at, and saying he was willing to help us get away on condition that when we got on our feet we'd make it up to him—of course we had to pay on the spot too. And we'd got a bit to do it with. I've heard them say on the Island he's making his fortune, McNab. . . .

"They say there are men in this country now—well off, holding big positions—who pay McNab what he likes because he helped them to get away. They pay because if they don't—no matter who they are, what they're doing—a word from him against them, and back they'd go to the darbies and the cells. But there's a new game now. A reward is out for the capture of escaped convicts."

The weary bitterness of his voice took a sharper edge.

"It was a hot night; I lay low near McNab's, waiting for the chance to tell him we'd come and get the food and clothes he'd promised to have ready for us. It was late. . . . I waited until there didn't seem anybody about the bar and the lights went out—all but the one in a room at the side. Then I got tired of waiting and crept up to the shanty and lay flat against the wall, hoping to see if the way was clear and I could get a word with McNab. . . . The wall was not thick, and there was a crack in it. I could see into that room with the light. McNab was there, and the trooper from Port Southern with him. Under his coat, I could make out his uniform. A bottle of rum made the talk go easy between them, and I heard the plan they were making. It was that M'Laughlin should not keep too close a watch for 'travellers' from the Island—be too keen on their scent

—and McNab should play friendly to them and tell M'Laughlin of their whereabouts when they thought they were getting off finely. He was to arrest them, and the pair of them would share the reward. Steve and I were expected. We were to be first victims."

Mary's exclamation of pity and horror comforted him. The compassion of her eyes banished the evil, mirthless smile from his.

"I got back to Steve," he said more quietly. "He was almost too ill to walk. He understood though that we would not be troubling McNab, when I told him what had happened, and was quiet—though he had been moaning and crying all day. It was because of his fever I was afraid to leave him again, or to try to get food in the township. So we started for the ranges. But we hadn't gone far when he gave out and I had to carry him. I wanted to get him away from the tracks where the sound of his raving could be heard, and so we've been in the hills ever since—nearly ten days it must be. This was the first clearing we sighted since we saw the Wirree, and we had to get what we could out of it, or die in our tracks. I'm talking sane enough now, but I was almost as mad as Steve—with hunger and rage at the thought of being taken again and serving to get reward money for McNab, when we came to the door, here. . . ."

He hesitated.

"It was the sight of you . . . looking like the Mother of God with the child in your arms . . . saved me."

"I'll give you all the food and clothes I can," she said.

"Ma'am"—his voice trembled. Then he said roughly: "You're not playing the Thad McNab game?"

Her eyes met his.

"Do you think so?" she asked. "Davey and I, a fine pair we are to play a game with you."

" You think it's the easiest way to get rid of us—to give us what we ask for ? "

She nodded, smiling.

" You are afraid, then ? "

" Not for myself—but for you."

There was no wavering in her eyes. " I was not wanting my husband to find you here. He might think it was his duty to send word back to the Port. He might . . . "

" He'd try."

" Yes, he'd try. But you've got a sick man to think of and you're at the end of your strength yourself. Donald's a strong man, and he has no love for desperate characters." A flickering smile played about her mouth. " You must be gone before he returns. You can rest here to-morrow and then you would be better going. You can read the stick by the door. The cross marks the day he went, it will be five days since then to-morrow, and he may be back on the sixth, or the seventh day."

The man looked from her to the sapling pole by the door, counted the notches on it and his eyes returned to her.

" You've heard naught good of convicts that you should be treating me so," he said.

" No, it's terrible tales, I've heard of the things they do, and the things that are done to them."

A shadow had fallen on her face.

" None too terrible for the truth," he said.

" They tell me—it was a man in Melbourne told me—it is the life makes them desperate," she cried. " Men who have been sent out for quite little things, become——"

" Dead to shame," he said, " men who would kill a woman who has served them as you have served us, for fear when they'd gone she would betray them—send her men and the black bloodhounds after them, condemn them to hell and torture again. Oh, women

have done it, and men like me have made other women pay."

A gleam of anger lighted Mary Cameron's eyes.

"If you believe I would give them the chance of taking you back again there is Donald's gun on the shelf," she said. "Settle the matter for yourself. But if you will believe the truth it is this: My heart is with you and all like you."

The sick man muttered and cried; Davey waking, wailed fretfully.

"We'll go to-morrow," the stranger said. "You'll give us food and clothing?"

"Yes," she replied a little wearily. "But will you not rest now? I must be sleeping myself because the child will be ill if I'm not careful of him."

The man stood before her abashed, his face working as though he were restraining the desire to cry as Davey was crying.

"I can't understand why you should be as you are," he said at length, his voice breaking.

"Ah, there's reason enough," she sighed, and turned away from him.

He threw himself down before the fire. But Mary did not sleep when she lay on the floor at the other end of the room, although the regular breathing of her guest told her when he slept. Once she sat up and looked at him where he lay stretched before the fire as he had thrown himself in an attitude of utter exhaustion. The rambling cries, and the moaning of the man on the bed, kept her awake. She found herself listening to the tangled threads of his raving. The firelight leapt in long beams across the room. There was no fear but a strange awe in her heart.

CHAPTER V

IN the morning the tall man's eyes followed Mary as she went about the work of her house.

As though he were dreaming, he watched her break dry branches and sticks for the fire across her knee. Then it occurred to him to offer to break them for her, and he fetched an armful of wood from the stack in the yard. He gazed as if it were strange and wonderful to see a woman washing dishes, sweeping, and cooking at her own hearth. He saw her leg-ropes and bail the cow, lead the cow and calf to the fenced paddock on the top of the hill after the milking, and carry buckets of water from the creek to the house, the sunlight touching her bare head and flashing from the water in her pails.

Mary did everything in a serene, methodical way, going from one task to another as though she were happy in each, and in no hurry to be done with it. He heard her calling to the fowls as she threw a handful of crumbs to them; and, seeing that he was watching, she told him, smiling a little, that the matronly, buff hen, Mother Bunch, was a very good hen indeed, laying every day, except Sunday, in the summer and spring time; and that the smart, speckled-backed pullet was no good at all for laying.

"She gives us a little brown egg now and then," Mary said, "and makes such a fuss about it! That's why I call her Fanny. She is so like Miss Fanny at home who could not sew at all well, but when she made a dress that a woman could wear all the countryside knew about

it. He"—she indicated the lordly rooster—"is called the Meester—that is the Master in English."

A smile showed in the man's sombre eyes.

Early in the morning she had given him a bowl of porridge and had eaten some herself. A bowl containing porridge for Steve when he wakened was set by the hearth.

The house was in order, Davey bathed, and put in his basket in the sun, and Mary was making bread of the little flour and meal left in the bags, when Steve awoke.

He sat up on the bed and looked uneasily about the room. He was a frail, sickly-looking creature. The fever had left him, but there were apprehension and desperate fear in his eyes, as with a quickened light they rested on her.

"He's awake!" Mary called softly to the man out of doors.

He sprang across the threshold.

"It's all right, Steve," he said. "This woman's a friend."

She had stooped to the hearth and lifted the bowl of porridge.

Steve ate like a hungry dog, tearing at the bread, and thrusting large spoonfuls of porridge into his mouth. Mary gave him a cup of hot milk. He swallowed it at once, and coughed and swore as it scalded his throat.

"If you could see what you can do for us in the way of clothes, ma'am," his companion said, "we'll be moving on."

Her eyes were troubled.

"If harm came of my helping you," she began, "if——"

"Innocent blood were shed," he said.

There was bitterness in his voice.

"You're like the rest of them. Good, bad or

indifferent, you herd us all together—convicts. If you mean,” his eyes sought hers, “if you mean you’re afraid that instead of helping to give a man another chance for his life you may be helping a wolf to harry the lambs, you’re making a mistake, ma’am. I swear by all I hold sacred, you’ll not repent of what you have done for me.”

Mary smiled, her tension of spirit relieved.

“I believe you,” she said simply.

She took Donald’s working clothes from the pegs where they hung behind the door. They were worn, but whole. From the heavy sea-chest that stood in the far corner of the room she took a grey flannel shirt, also one of unbleached calico, and a pair of dingy black trousers; then she brought a pair of broken boots and a torn felt hat from the shed where the plough and tools were kept.

“There’s only one hat, and I’ll have to stitch it for you,” she said, “but he”—with a glance at Steve who had fallen asleep again on the bed—“he won’t have need of a hat for awhile with that bandage on his head, and when the cut is healed, you had better give him this one to wear, and you will be able to say you have lost yours.”

The tall man glanced from Donald’s heavy boots to Steve’s bruised and blackened feet.

“You had better put on those yourself,” Mary said, following his glance, “perhaps he could wear mine.”

She sat down and took off her shoes.

While he measured her shoe against Steve’s foot, she slipped her feet into a broken pair of green-hide covers clamped with nails that Donald had made.

“They will be right for him,” he said. “I’ll waken him now and we’ll get on our way.”

She took the bread that had been browning on the

hearth stones and put it on the table. The hut was filled with the warm, sweet smell of the newly-baked loaves.

"You can change in here while I put Davey to sleep outside," she said. "And there's a pail of water and soap there by the doorway; it will do you no harm to douse with it."

The tall man laughed. It was a boyish burst, that laugh of his. The piece of advice, womanly in its essence, and delivered with an air of maternal solicitude, touched a forgotten well-spring of merriment.

Mary lifted Davey into her arms, and sang to him softly as she walked up and down in the sunshine.

A long, straggling figure came to her a few moments later, clad in Donald's clothes. She smiled to see the way they hung short of his ankles, hitched over the long, thin legs. But the dowsing of creek water had done more than cleanse his body; in an indefinable way it had purified and stimulated the inner man. He had found Donald's shears, too, and had clipped the shaggy growth about his chin to a modest beard, and shorn his head of some of its shock of hair.

"You have the air of a daffy young Englishman just arrived in the Colonies to make your fortune," she said.

"Ma'am, isn't that what I am?"

There was a blithe recklessness in his voice. He swept her the bow that was considered gallant in the old country.

Steve appeared in the doorway.

"Are you going now?" she asked.

He nodded.

"But I must give you some bread and milk to take with you," she said. "It will be a long time before you strike Middleton's. It was there I was thinking you

might make for at first. It's across the ranges to the east. If you follow the track across the clearing, you will find a stock route. You've only to keep along that and it will bring you to the station. It's four or five days' journey from here, I think, and maybe there'll be a job with cattle there. Drovers are being wanted everywhere—they were when we came up from the Port nearly a year ago."

"Yes," he said, "we heard in the Island that every man in the country's wanting to be gold-hunting, and that the cattle-owners can't get beasts to the market. They're running off wild, where the stockmen have left them. We want any job that'll bring food and money to begin with, and they say men with cattle are not making too particular inquiries as to whose doing their drovin' so long as it's done."

She put Davey in his basket, and went back to the hut. When she reappeared, it was with some bread and a bottle of milk wrapped in a piece of bagging.

"You'll have no trouble about water, because there are creeks all through the hills," she said, as she put the bundle into his hand.

Steve had gone off without speaking to her. He was slouching towards the trees.

The tall man took the food from her. Their eyes met.

"Have I ever seen you before? I seem to know you," she asked, distress on her face.

"Pray God not, ma'am," he said.

"What is your name?"

"You'd better not know."

For a moment, in a storm of gratitude and emotion, his mind trembled on the verge of self-revelation. His face worked uncertainly.

"I cannot say what I want to," he said at last, as if restraint denied him almost any expression at all. "This

is a debt, ma'am. If ever, in any way, I can repay, I will. But there's no way of letting you know what you have done for me."

For a moment his eyes held hers. Then he turned away, and she watched him stride across the clearing and disappear among the trees.

CHAPTER VI

IN her sleep Mary heard the rumble and groan of the wagon as it ground its way along the rough tracks and crashed over the undergrowth. She awakened to hear the yelping of dogs, the lowing of cattle, sounds of men's voices in the clearing. For a moment she believed that her mind was still hovering in the troubled state of dreams. Then Donald's voice calling her struck through the drowsy uncertainty. Trembling, she sprang out of bed and threw Davey's red shawl about her shoulders. She lighted the dip in a bowl of melted fat and put it on to the table.

" Mary ! "

Again his voice, hoarse and impatient, came from the darkness on the edge of the clearing.

She pulled back the bolts and threw open the door.

" Yes," she called.

Donald loomed out of the darkness. Across the clearing, by the swinging light of a lantern before the wagon, she dimly saw its white shape, and the moving backs of cattle.

Her arms went out to Donald when he stood before her.

" Where's the dog ? " he asked.

" Dead," she said quietly.

From her eyes and her face as she fell back, he learnt that something unusual had happened.

" Then there has been trouble ? " he said.

She nodded.

He swept his hat off with a great sigh.

"But you're all right, you and the bairn?"

"Yes."

"When the dog did not fly out as we got near the house I thought something had happened. There are tales in the Port of two men from Hobart Town, escaped convicts, having taken to the hills. Their boat was found in the Wirree. I tried to get back sooner, fearing they might come this way, but the roads were bad and then there were the cattle. I haven't had an easy minute since I've been away. But we can talk later. There's a boy come with me, drivin' the cattle. I got a mob, cheap, from a man whose stockmen had cleared out and left them on his hands. Get us something to eat ready, I'll bring the wagon up to the shed now. You can get what you want from it. There's corned meat and oatmeal and flour for a year. We'll put the cattle into the fenced paddock and then come down. You can clear out the wagon enough to put a sheepskin or two and a blanket in it for Johnson."

He turned away and went back into the night.

Mary threw more wood on the fire. As she put on her skirt and bodice, she heard the wagon labouring forward.

She was out getting the flour and bacon she wanted from it by the light of a lantern, when, with a rattling of horns and a thunder of hoofs, the cattle beat past her along the track behind the sheds. The lantern light gave a vision of fierce, bloodshot eyes of terror in a sea of tossing backs, of moving flanks, and branching horns. She heard her husband's voice, hoarse and yelling, the voice of the strange youth, and the cracking of whips and yelping of dogs for nearly an hour afterwards as they tried to get the beasts into the fenced paddock on the hill-top.

It was nearly dawn before Donald and the slight, insignificant-looking young man he had brought with him from Port Southern had finished their meal. Then the stockman went to sleep in the wagon, and Donald Cameron turned to his wife.

"Tell me what happened," he said.

She did so very simply.

"They must have been the same men I heard of in the Port," he said, breathing hard. "M'Laughlin, the trooper, told me about them . . . and that I had best look out for them up here. There was no telling what they might do, he said—a desperate pair—would stop at nothing. I am not sure that I'd better not send Johnson back to tell him that they've been here and that——"

"You would not do that, Donald?"

"Why not?"

His voice, the suppressed rage of it, was a shock to her.

"A man cannot leave his home in safety with these sort of men about . . . and it is the duty of every honest man to deal as he would be dealt by. You're a clever woman, and no harm has come to you by them . . . but there are other women who might not be so clever."

"But they were not bad men, Donald; one of them was sick, and the other——"

"It would be a good thing too, being new in the district, to stand well with the police," he continued doggedly, "and if they were here, those two, they would either make back for the Port, or the Wirree, or try to get to Middleton's. If they're on foot, as ye say, they could not go fast, and M'Laughlin with horses could catch them up in a day or two. Which way did they go?"

Mary turned her head away. A sick feeling of grief and disappointment overcame her. His eyes covered the averted curve of her face and the line of her neck.

"Which way did they go?" he asked, thickly.

"Donald," she turned to him. "I promised not to send anyone after them. You know, and I know, that lots of men have been sent out for things that were not crimes at all, and——"

"You know and you will not tell me?" he asked harshly, as though he had not heard.

"Yes," she cried.

He took her by the shoulder. His arm trembled.

"I have stood this sort of thing long enough," he said. "On the ship and in Melbourne it was the same. You were always doing such things, feeding, or giving your clothes to filthy, ailing gaol-birds and whiners. I have told you, you could not afford to do it. No respectable woman can afford to, in a country where every second woman has the prison mark on her. Show sympathy with lags, and what'll be said next? You're a lag yourself and that's why your sympathy's with them. Y're my wife, the wife of a decent man and free settler, I'd have y'r remember that, and I'll not have it said of you!"

He threw her off from him.

"Which way did they go?"

Keen and compelling, the deep-set eyes, those indwelling places of his will, met hers.

"It was my word I gave, Donald," his wife said, "and I can't tell you."

CHAPTER VII

IN ten years, Cameron's had become the biggest clearing in the hills, as it was the oldest. Many others had been made and were scattered throughout the lower ranges overlooking the Wirree plains, though at great distances apart; ten, twelve and sometimes twenty miles lying between neighbouring homesteads.

The hut that had been Donald and Mary Cameron's first home had been broadened by the addition of several extra rooms. Floors had been put down and a wide verandah spread out from them. Every room had a window with four small glass panes. The window-sills, verandah posts and doors had been painted green, and the whole of the house whitewashed. Its bark roof had given place to a covering of plum-coloured slates; there was even a coin or two of grey and golden lichen on them, and the autumn and spring rains drummed merrily on the iron roof of the verandah. Creepers climbed around the stone chimney and the verandah; clematis showered starry white blossom over the roof and about the verandah post.

A little garden, marked-off from the long green fields of spring wheat by a fence of sharp-toothed palings, was filled with bright flowers—English marigolds, scarlet geraniums, pink, yellow and blue larkspurs—and all manner of sweet-smelling herbs—sage, mint, marjoram and lemon thyme. The narrow, beaten paths that ran from the verandah to the gate and round the house were bordered with rosemary. And in the summer a long line of hollyhocks, pink, white and red, and red

and white, waved, tall and straight, at one side of the house. The edge of the forest had been distanced so far on every side of the clearing, except one, that the trunks of the trees showed in dim outlines against it, the misty, drifting leafage swaying over and across them. Only on the side on which the track climbed uphill from the road, the trees still pressed against the paddock railings. A long white gate in the fence where the road stopped bore the name Donald Cameron had given his place—"Ayrmuir." It was the name of the estate he had worked on in Scotland when he was a lad. It gave him no end of satisfaction to realise that he was the master of "Ayrmuir," and that his acres were broader than those of the "Ayrmuir" in the old country; not only broader, but his to do what he liked with—his property, unencumbered by mortgage or entail.

On the cleared hillsides about the house, crops of wheat, barley and rye had been sown. An orchard climbed the slope on the left. Behind the old barn and the stables were a row of haystacks. The cowsheds and milking yards were a little further away. Round the haystacks and about the barn a score of the buff and buttermilk-coloured progeny of Mother Bunch, a few speckled chickens, black and white pullets, and miscellaneous breeds of red-feathered, and long-legged, yellow fowls, scratched and pecked industriously.

Donald Cameron farmed his land in the careful fashion of the Lowland Scots. There was perhaps here and there a crooked line in his fields and a rick awry behind the barns. But all was neatness and order, from the beehives which stood with their pointed straw bonnets beneath the apple trees, to the cowsheds, where newly-cut bracken was laid down every day or two for the cows to stand in when they were milked. There was no filth or squelching morass in his cow-yards. The pigs wandered

over the hills rooting under the tender grass. Scarcely a straw was allowed to stray between the back of the house and barns. In the feed-room, the harness-room, in every shed and yard, the meticulous precision and passion for order which characterised all that Donald Cameron did, was maintained.

There were changes indoors as well as out. A long straight kitchen, with a bricked floor and small window looking out on to the yard, had been added to the original home. On the east side, two rooms had been built, and a small limewashed shed behind the kitchen served for a dairy. In it, on broad low shelves against the wall, the rows of milk pans, with milk setting in them, were ranged ; a small window in the back wall framed a square of blue sky. When Mrs. Cameron was making butter, the sound of the milk in the churn, the rumble and splash of the curded cream, could be heard in the yard. The sweet smell of the new butter and buttermilk hung about the kitchen door.

Ten years of indefatigable energy, of clearing land, breaking soil, raising crops and rearing cattle, doing battle with the wilderness, overcoming all the hardships and odds that a pioneer has to struggle against, had left their mark on Donald Cameron. Every line in his face was ploughed deep.

His expression, gloomy and taciturn as of old, masked an internal concentration, the bending of all faculties to the one end that occupied him. Always a man of few words, as the farm grew and its operations increased, he became more and more silent, talking only when it was necessary and seldom for the sake of companionship or mere social intercourse. His mind was always busy with the movements of cattle, branding, mustering, breeding, buying and selling prices, possibilities of the market. He worked insatiably.

He was reminded of the flight of time only by the growth of his son—a gawky, long-limbed boy.

As soon as he could walk Davey had taken his share in the work of the homestead, rounding up cows in the early morning, feeding fowls, hunting for eggs in the ripening crops, scaring birds from the ploughed land when seed was in, and cutting ferns for the cow-sheds and stables. His father was little more than a dour taskmaster to the boy. Davey had no memory of hearing him sing the gathering song of the Clan of Donald the Black.

His mother had taught him to read and count as she sat with her spinning wheel in the little garden in front of the house, or stitching by the fire indoors on winter evenings. Davey had to sit near her and spell out the words slowly from the Bible or the only other book she had, a shabby little red history. Sometimes when he was tired of reading, or the click and purr of her wheel set her mind wandering, she told him stories of the country over the sea where she was born. Davey knew that the song she sang sometimes when she was spinning was a song a fairy had taught a Welshwoman long ago so that her spinning would go well and quickly. She told him stories of the tylwyth teg—the little brown Welsh fairies. There was one he was never tired of hearing.

“Tell me about the farmer’s boy who married the fairy, mother,” he would say eagerly.

And she would tell him the story she had heard when she was a child.

“Once upon a time,” she would say, “ever so long ago, there was a farmer’s boy who minded his father’s sheep on a wild, lonely mountain side. Not a mountain side like any we see in this country, Davey dear, but bare and dark, with great rocks on it. And one day, when he

was all alone up there, he saw a girl looking at him from round a rock. Her hair was so dark that it seemed part of the rock, and her face was like one of the little flowers that grow on the mountain side. But he knew that it was not a flower's face, because there were eyes in it, bright, dark eyes—and a mouth on it . . . a little, red mouth with tiny, white teeth behind it. They played on the mountain together for a long time and sometimes she helped him to drive his sheep. After a while they got so fond of each other that the boy asked her to go home with him to his father's house, and he told his father that he wanted to marry her.

"That night a lot of little men, riding on grey horses, came down from the mountain on a path of moonlight and clattered into the farmyard of the farmer of Ystrad. The smallest and fattest of the men, in a red coat . . . they all wore red coats, and rode grey horses. Did I say that they all rode grey horses, Davey?"

"Yes, mother," Davey breathed.

She had this irritating little way of going back a word or two on her story if a thread caught on her wheel.

"Well——" she began again, and, as likely as not, her mind taken up with the tangled thread, would add: "Where was I, Davey?"

And Davey, all impatience for her to go on with the story, though he could have almost told it himself, would say: "And the smallest and fattest of the men, in a red coat——"

"Oh, yes!" Mary started again: "Strode into the kitchen and pinched the farmer's ear, and said that he was Penelop's father . . . the girl's name was Penelop . . . and that he would let her marry the farmer's son, and give her a dowry of health, wealth and happiness, on condition that nobody ever touched her with a piece of iron. If anybody put a piece of iron on her,

Penelop's father said, she would fly back to the mountain and her own people, and never more sit by her husband's hearth and churn or spin for him. So the farmer's boy married Penelop and very happily they lived together. Everything on the farm prospered because of the fairy wife, though she wore a red petticoat and was like any other woman to look at, only more beautiful, and always busy and merry. She made fine soup and cheese, and her spinning was always good, and everybody was very fond of her. Then one day when her husband wanted to go to a fair, she ran into the fields to help him to catch his pony. And while he was throwing the bridle, the iron struck her arm—and that minute she vanished into the air before his eyes."

She paused for Davey's exclamation of wonderment ; and then continued :

" Though he wandered all over the mountain calling her, Penelop never came back to her husband or the two little children she had left with him. But one very cold night in the winter, he wakened out of his sleep to hear her saying outside in the wind and rain :

" Lest my son should find it cold,
Place on him his father's coat.
Lest the fair one find it cold,
Place on her my petticoat. "

Mary sang the words to a quaint little air of her own making, while Davey listened, big-eyed and awe-stricken.

" When the children grew up they had dark hair and bright, sparkling eyes like their mother," she would conclude, smiling at him. " And when they had children they were like them, too, so that people who came from the valley where the farmer's boy had married the fairy

were always known by their looks, and they were called Pellings, or the children of Penelop, because it was said they had fairy blood in their veins."

Davey had always a thousand questions to ask. He liked to brood over the story; but he learnt more than fairy tales from his mother's memories of the old land. Her mind was beginning to be occupied with thoughts of his future. She and her husband were simple folk. Cameron could barely read and write, and what little knowledge Mary possessed she had already passed on to Davey. She knew what Donald Cameron's ambitions were, and after ten years of life with him had little doubt as to their achievement. The position that it would put Davey in had begun to be a matter of concern to her.

She was turning over in her mind her plans for his getting a good education, as she sat spinning beside the fireplace in the kitchen one evening, when her husband said suddenly:

"I wish to goodness you'd put that clacking thing away—have done with it now!"

"My wheel?" she asked, mild surprise in her eyes.

"Aye," he said impatiently. He was sitting in his chair on the other side of the hearth. "Don't you realise, woman, it's not the thing for Mrs. Cameron of Ayrmuir to be doing. Don't you realise y're a person of importance now. The lady of the countryside, if it comes to that, and for you to sit there, tapping and clacking that thing, is as good as telling everybody y' were a wench had to twist up wool for a living a few years ago."

She stared at him. He shifted his seat uneasily.

"I've been thinking," he continued, "it's no good having made the name and the money unless we live up to it. You must get a girl to help y' with the work of the house, and we'll not sit in here any more in the

evening, but in the front room, and have our meals there."

"But the new carpet that's laid down . . . and the new furniture, Donald," she exclaimed.

"They're not there to be looked at, are they?" he asked. "Last spring sales they were calling me 'Laird of Ayrmuir.' I cleared near on a thousand pounds.

"I'm not wanting to be flash and throw away money," he added hastily. "But that's to show you, we can, and are going to live, something the way they did at Ayrmuir in the old country."

She rose and lifted the spinning wheel from its place by the fire. It was like putting an old and tried friend from her. But when she sat down on her chair opposite Donald Cameron again there was a new steady light in her eyes.

"You'll be a rich man indeed, Donald, if you go on as you are doing," she said.

"Aye." He gazed before him, smoking thoughtfully.

"And your son will be a rich man after you?"

"Aye."

"Well, you must have him properly educated for the position he is going to have." She came steadily to her point. "All your money won't be any use to him, it will only make him ashamed to go where the money could take him unless he has got the education to hold his own."

Her eyes drew his from their contemplation of the fireplace and the falling embers.

"You've the book learning, why can't you give it to him?" he said.

"I have given him as much as I can," she sighed, "but it's little enough. I'm not such a fine scholar as you think, Donald. There are things in those books that you brought from the Port—in the sale lot with the

arm-chair and the fire-irons—that I cannot make head nor tail of, though the fore-bits I've read say that: 'A knowledge of the contents is essential to a liberal education.' "

She pronounced the words slowly and carefully; Donald Cameron frowned. He did not exactly know what she was driving at, but those words sounded important.

"I've been thinking," Mary went on quickly, "there's a good many people about here now, and they ought to be getting their children educated too. There's the Morrisons, Mackays, Rosses and O'Brians. And there's a child at the new shanty on the top of the track, Mrs. Ross was telling me, last time she was here. Between the lot of us we ought to be able to put up a school and get a teacher. A barn on the road would do for a school. In other parts of the country the people are getting up schools. The newspaper you brought from Port Southern last sales said that. Why should not we?"

"And where will you get y'r teacher," Cameron asked grimly.

Her colour rose.

"I know what you mean," she said. "The only sort of men who could and would think it worth while giving school to children are the convicts and ticket-of-leave men; but there are decent men among them. They seem to be doing very well in other places. I see that mothers are going to the school-room and sitting there, doing their sewing, so that they can be sure the children are learning no harm with their lessons. We could not do that every day here, but now and then one of us mothers could go to see that the school was going on well. Anyway, the children must be taught and we've got to make the best bargain we can."

"I'll think of what you say," her husband replied.

"You'll be going to the Clearwater River to-morrow, and be away a day or two, won't you?" she asked. "I might take the cart and Lass and go and see what Mrs. Ross and Martha Morrison and Mrs. Mackay think of getting a school."

"If people about are willing," Donald Cameron said, brooding over his pipe, "it'd be a good thing for all of us—a school. The difficulty I can see will be the teacher. Can we get one? There's high wages for stockmen and drovers. But maybe there'll be just some stranded young fool glad of the job and the chance of makin' a little money without soiling his hands. You could pick them up by the score in Melbourne, but here——"

He shook his head.

"You might ask a few questions in the Port when you're there, if there is any likely young man," she said.

"Aye, I might," he replied. There was an amused gleam in his eyes as he looked up at her. "You seem to have thought a good deal on this matter before using y're tongue."

"Is it not a good way?" she asked, the smile in her eyes, too.

"Aye," he admitted grudgingly, "a very good way. And you do not mean the grass to grow under y're feet, Mary?"

"No, indeed!"

She put her work-basket away, took the lighted candle from the table and went to her room. The loose star of the candle flickered a moment in the gloom and then was extinguished. But Donald Cameron, left alone before the fire, realised that the subject of Davey's schooling had been disposed of.

CHAPTER VIII

It took Mrs. Cameron some time to make her round of visits. But she was very pleased with the result of them. On the afternoon of the third day, she drove in a high spring-cart, up the steep hillside, on the top of which a shanty had been built only a few months before.

It was a stopping place for stockmen and travellers on the overland track, the only one between the scattered settlements on the other side of the ranges and the Wirree River. From the head of the ranges it looked down on the falling slopes of lesser hillsides and on the wide sweep of the inland plains. It was not more than five or six miles from Ayrmuir, but she had made it the last place to visit, thinking that she might not have time to get to it before her husband was due to return from the Clearwater. She had settled in her own mind to make a separate journey some afternoon if she could not include it in this one. But her plans had gone well and briskly.

All the women she had seen thought the school a good idea and were anxious to have it; the men had promised to help in the building, and to pay the share that she had mentioned as likely to be asked of them for the school-master's services.

Davey had enjoyed the first part of the excursion as much as she had. He had romped and run wild with boys and girls on the homesteads they had been to. It was only when they were leaving Ross's that morning

he had been disturbed. After his mother and Mrs. Ross had kissed good-bye, Mrs. Cameron had shaken hands with Ted and Mick Ross and kissed little Jessie, and he had shaken hands with Mrs. Ross and grinned at the boys, Mrs. Ross exclaimed :

“ Why Davey hasn't said good-bye to Jess ! ”

She had lifted the child up to his face. Jess's soft skin against his and her wet baby mouth overwhelmed him with confusion. He brushed his coat sleeve across his cheek.

“ Oh Davey ! ” his mother laughed.

Mrs. Ross laughed too, and Ted and Mick giggled hilariously.

Davey had climbed into the cart and taken his seat by his mother, angry and offended. He had no idea why they were laughing at him ; and he sat stolid and sullen, brooding over it all the morning.

When they came to the ramshackle house of grey palings, with a roof of corrugated iron, on the top of the hill, two or three dogs flew out, barking furiously. A bullock-wagon was drawn up on the side of the road, and a lean stock horse, hitched to a post, stood twitching his tail to keep the flies away. Half a dozen scraggy fowls scratched and pecked about the water-butt.

A bare-legged little girl with wind-tossed dark hair ran out and stood staring at them. She had a little white, freckled face, and eyes as shy and bright as a startled wild creature.

Mrs. Cameron got down from the cart, leaving Davey in it holding the reins.

“ Good-day,” she said to the child. “ I want to see Mr. Stevens.”

The child stared at her.

Then a man came to the dark doorway of the house, a lean, lithe man, with bearded chin and quick restless eyes.

She went towards him and explained in a few eager words why she had come.

"Will you come in and take a seat, ma'am," he asked, his voice vibrating strangely.

She went into the house; its very shadow exhaled a stale smell of crude spirits and tobacco.

"You'd better give Lass a drink, Davey," she called. "I'll be back presently."

The room she stepped into was kept with an attempt at orderliness. It was bare and cleanly. The dull afternoon sunshine garnished its bare walls, the rough chairs and the bunks against the wall. The man had followed her into the room and now faced her. There was a suspension of the breath in his nostrils as this quiet, grey-clad woman lifted her eyes to his.

Neither of them spoke for a few minutes.

People passed and repassed the room, feet dragged, curious glances strayed into it.

"If you recognise us—give us away—the game's up," he muttered.

"I understand," Mrs. Cameron said.

"Steve made some money on the fields," he said. "He bought this place and Deirdre and I came with him to see him settled. Deirdre—the child you saw outside—belongs to me."

"It's about her I came," Mrs. Cameron explained hurriedly, glad to leave the ground of troubled memory.

She described the scheme for getting a school in the district, building a room somewhere on the roadside, at a point where it could be reached by children of the scattered clearings.

"Who's to be the teacher?" he asked.

Sitting on a low form, he leaned across the table and gazed at her.

Through the open window she could see Davey sitting

up very stiff and straight in the spring-cart. He had taken his red history book from his pocket and was pretending to read. The child whom the man before her had called Deirdre was standing staring at him. A smile flitted across Mrs. Cameron's face. She thought that Davey had not forgiven her sex for the discomfiture it had put upon him that morning, and was determined to have nothing to do with little girls.

"That's our difficulty, the teacher," she said. "The only persons who have the education, who are able to be teachers, are——"

"Transports—convicts," he interrupted harshly. "Beg your pardon, ma'am"—his voice dropped contritely as he continued—"You were saying the only persons in the colony who could be school teachers are persons of evil character who could not be depended on not to corrupt the children. What are you going to do then?"

"We thought if we could get a young man with the education, who seemed reformed, we would give him a chance," she said. "For a while the mothers would go to the school and sit there during some of the lesson-times to see——"

"That the children did not learn more than their reading, writing and arithmetic."

"Yes," she smiled. "Do you think you would be willing to let your little girl come to the school if we can get a teacher?"

He flung off his seat and strode restlessly up and down the room.

"She's a wild cat. She wouldn't go unless——"

He threw back his head looking at her, a blithe defiance creeping into his eyes and voice.

"Unless you made me the teacher," he said. "What would you say if I applied for the post?"

“ You ! ”

Her eyes were wide with amazement.

“ Oh I thought so ! ” he laughed. “ But your reformed young man would have something of a past too, you know, and it might not be as clean even as mine. It’s a pity you won’t consider me as a likely person. I’ve got what you call the ‘ education.’ ”

“ Have you ? ” she asked eagerly. “ The grammar, geography, all the—the learning that is—‘ essential to a liberal education ’ ? ”

“ All that, and letters after my name for it,” he said, bitterly. “ But I’m an Irishman . . . I called myself a patriot—and any stick is good enough to beat a dog with. I don’t know exactly what they called my offence—‘ inciting to revolt,’ or ‘ using seditious language,’ perhaps ; but I have earned my sentence since I got here. It was that I was doing all the time in New South Wales and the Island—‘ inciting to revolt ’ and ‘ using seditious language ’ . . . but the fire’s gone out of me now. I want a quiet life.”

In his eyes she read a passionate impatience and weariness.

“ If you were willing that I should be the schoolmaster, the other people would be likely to have me, perhaps,” he continued. “ They would not know what you know, and I can play the part of the broken-down fool who has lost every penny he had on the fields.”

“ It does not rest with me, naming the schoolmaster, of course,” she said, a little troubled. “ But if the others are willing to have you I shall be glad.”

She had a native grace that took for granted in others her own sincerity and purity of motive.

“ I am grateful, Mrs. Cameron,” he said.

She smiled to think that he knew her name.

“ You are——”

"Daniel Farrel," he said.

When they went out of doors Lass was standing deserted, with her nose over the water-butt. There was no sight or sound of Davey or Deirdre. Her father called; and presently she came racing round the corner of the house, hair flying, and eyes bright with mischief and laughter.

Davey followed at a break-neck pace. His collar was twisted and a jagged three-cornered tear showed in his grey trousers. The girl flew to her father. Davey came to a standstill sheepishly, a few yards from his mother.

"What have you been doing, Deirdre?" Farrel asked.

"Showing him the ring-tail 'possum's nest in the tree at the back of the cow-yard," she said eagerly. "He couldn't climb because his trousers were too tight, and I raced him up the hill."

"She's a wild thing—has never had anybody but me to look after her," he said to Mrs. Cameron, the black head under his hand.

"Her mother's dead?" Mrs. Cameron asked gently.

"Yes," he said.

Davey and Mrs. Cameron drove away. Davey craned his neck, looking back along the road several times, and the last time he looked Deirdre was standing alone, an elfish figure outlined against the sunset.

"She *can* run, mother!" he cried, his eyes alight. "She can run and climb quicker than anybody I ever saw. P'raps—I believe she's a Pelling, mother! She's got the bright eyes and black hair."

"Maybe"—Mary Cameron said, smiling at his eagerness and belief in the old story, "maybe there's fairy blood in her veins."

CHAPTER IX

It was not long before a barn-like building of slatted shingles appeared in a clearing off the road, two or three miles below Steve's. It stood on log foundations, as if on account of its importance, and had a door at one end of its road-facing wall instead of in the middle, as ordinary houses had, and two windows with small square panes of glass stared out on the road.

Drovers and teamsters on the roads, as they passed, halted-up to listen to the children singing, and went on their way with oaths of admiration, throats and eyes aching sometimes at the memories and vivid pictures the sound brought them.

Behind the school was the bark-thatched hut which had been run up for the Schoolmaster to live in. Donald Cameron had given the plot of land for the school and he had promised to sell the Schoolmaster a few acres beside it, if he wanted to make use of his spare time to clear the land, put in a crop, or make a garden. Mr Farrel soon intimated that he did, and came to terms with Donald Cameron.

At first no more than a dozen children went to school. Some walked, others came tumbling into the clearing, two or three a-back of a stolid, jog-trotting, old horse, others arrived packed together in a spring-cart. At the back of the clearing was a fenced paddock into which the horses were turned during school hours.

They were a merry company of young warrigals, these children of the hills, when they poured out of the school

doorway, played in the clearing at midday, munching their crusty lunches, or chased in the horses, as a preliminary to scrambling on to them and racing each other helter-skelter down the bush tracks, spreading and straggling in every direction to their homes.

The Schoolmaster governed them all with an easy familiarity. He had an eager, boyish way of talking when he explained a peculiarity of spelling, or grammar, or a story from history—a light reckless humour that made Mrs. Cameron, if she were sitting by the window, sewing, look up uneasily, her serene face disturbed, her eyes mildly reproving. But the children laughed and loved the flippancies. They scratched and scraped the better for being on good terms with the Schoolmaster, although Mrs. Cameron was afraid that they had not a proper respect for him and that he was not dignified enough with them.

She was not the only woman who sat on the seat by the window. Sometimes Mrs. Ross or Mrs. Morrison took a turn there and knitted or stitched as they watched to see that the Schoolmaster's behaviour was all that might be expected. They knew nothing of Mr. Farrel's history or antecedents. As far as they were concerned he was a broken-down Irishman who had come to make his fortune on the goldfields and lost any money he had. That was his story; and that he wanted to live a quiet life for awhile, away from the temptations and risks of the scramble for gold. His manner and air were decorous enough to make them believe it; and after the first few visits of inspection they were satisfied not to make any more. Only Mary Cameron was concerned as to the nature of some of the seeds he was sowing in the minds of the young generation. She had heard him describing the state of Ireland under His Most Gracious Majesty George III. to the older boys and girls, and on

another occasion had heard him telling them that the exports of Great Britain were cotton and woollen goods, coal and iron, and convicts to New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land.

"Did you have good lessons to-day, Davey," she asked one evening when her son was poring over his books.

"Not half as good as yesterday, when you were there, mother," he said.

"Why, how was that?" she asked.

"Oh, Mr. Farrel says more things to make us laugh when you're there," he said, going on with his writing, painstakingly. "He made me do sums all this morning, and I'd never have got them right if Deirdre hadn't helped me. He lets her sit next me, now."

When school was out, a day or two later, Mrs. Cameron rose from her seat by the window. She tied her bonnet strings.

The Schoolmaster hummed the tune the children had been singing before they clattered out for the day; it was an old English folk song that he had taught them. As he put away his books and pencils, his eyes wandered towards Mrs. Cameron once or twice. Her back was to him; she was looking out of the window.

He strode over to her. He knew she was displeased. His eyes had the guilty look of awaiting reproof, the glad light of the miscreant who knows that he has done wrong but has enjoyed doing it. He had not admitted to himself even that his reason for talking to make the children laugh and pointing a story from history with a radical or cynical moral, was that her anxiety about the instruction they were getting might not be quite lulled. He did not want her to give up coming to the school and cease to occupy the seat by the window occasionally.

But there was something in her face this afternoon that he had not seen there before.

"It was a pity to talk to the children the way you did to-day," she said simply.

"Facts, Mrs. Cameron!" he cried gaily. "The facts of life presented in an interesting form are far more important to boys and girls than a knowledge of—let us say—geography."

"It was geography, among other things, we asked you to teach them," she replied.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am."

His pride was cut to the quick; he bowed, awkwardly.

"I shan't be coming to the school any more, Mr. Farrel," she said after a few moments. There was an odd mixture of dignity and humility in her bearing.

"We're all grateful to you for what you have done in teaching the children. I knew from the first that you were to be trusted—that no harm would come of your schooling—and Davey has told me that it is only when I am here that you talk as you have done to-day. You know I've been coming for my own learning and not to see that you taught properly. I came often because I wanted to learn, and keep up with Davey . . . so that I could help him by-and-by, perhaps."

There was an unmistakable break in her voice.

"It was not very kind . . . to laugh at me."

She took the wild flowers from the jar of water on her table by the window, as she always did, and went to the door.

It had been very pleasant for her to sit on the bench under the window, hearing the children sing old country songs, and listening to the Schoolmaster telling them of other parts of the world, of rules of speech and calculation, of the nature of the earth, the heavens, the stars and the sea, of kingdoms, strange peoples, and their histories

and occupations. The sunlight had come through the open window ; and a breeze, bearing the honey fragrance of the white-gum blossoms fleecing the trees on the edge of the clearing, had fanned her face. She was so sorry to be giving up those days in the school-room that a mist of tears stood in her eyes as she glanced about it. She had felt an innocent, almost childish pleasure in them, and in learning with the children.

“ Mrs. Cameron—— ”

The Schoolmaster sprang after her. The trouble in his face surprised her.

“ Don’t say that I—that I—that you think I could—— ”

He was not able to say “ laugh at you.” But she had gone.

He dropped into her chair by the window and threw his arms across the table.

CHAPTER X

THE school had been working for over three years when Mrs. Cameron and the Schoolmaster came to an agreement by which Davey was to have extra lessons after school hours—to learn something of foreign languages, and of the higher mathematics, not to speak of other odds and ends of knowledge that Mr. Farrel might consider part of that “ liberal education ” she was so anxious he should acquire—and Deirdre was to stay with Mrs. Cameron for a while, and learn to cook and sew, and, generally, to practise woman’s ways about a house.

It was bareback on Lass, that Davey and Deirdre came jogging along the road from school for the first time.

Mrs. Cameron heard their shrill, joyous voices long before they emerged from the cover of the trees ; then she watched them climbing the track across the rise, straddling the old horse’s fat sides, Deirdre with her arms round Davey’s waist, the red handkerchief containing her wardrobe in his left hand, fast in Lass’s matted mane. He gave the old mare a flick, now and again, with a stripped branch he had in his right hand, though it made no more impression than a fly alighting on her thick hair. She kept on at her steady, jogging pace until they were against the yard gate.

Mrs. Cameron laughed when she saw them.

She kissed Deirdre and took the red bundle from Davey’s hand.

“ Father says,” Deirdre said, a quaint air of sedateness

settling down on her, "that he's 'shamed to send me without stockings or a wedding garment, Mrs. Cameron. But if you will get what is necessary for me next time you go to the Port he will be—what was it, Davey?"

"Extremely obliged," Davey replied carefully. "Mr. Farrel says that he's bought her shoes and stockings over and over again, mother, but she won't wear them."

"There's two shoes in the 'possum's nest by our house, and a pair of boots in the creek," Deirdre admitted with a sidelong look at him.

While Davey took Lass to the paddock on the top of the hill, Deirdre went indoors with Mrs. Cameron. She had never been away from her father before. At first she had been surprised at the suggestion of going anywhere without him, but he had told her that she was going to learn to be like Mrs. Cameron—a good housewife—so that she could look after him and their home as well as a grown woman; and she was delighted at the idea. Jogging up the hills behind Davey, she had not realised that she was to spend the night away from "Dan," as he was to her in all her tense moments.

It was only when she went into the tiny, box-like, paper-covered room with two little white beds in it that she began to understand this. She gazed at the room, she had never seen anything like it, with its white covers, little cupboard with a mirror on it, and papered walls spread with red and brown flowers.

"You must wash your face and hands, and feet, Deirdre," Mrs. Cameron said, "and then I'll bring you a pair of Davey's shoes and stockings to wear until I can get others for you."

She unknotted the red handkerchief. The two or three little garments of coarse calico it contained had been washed and rough-dried. Mary turned them over critically.

"Dan washed them himself," Deirdre said, sullenly sensing the criticism. "He put them under his bed and slept on them so that they would look nice this morning. He sewed up the holes, too. And he said 'O God!' when he folded them up and put them in the handkerchief."

Mrs. Cameron stared at the clothes, her heart sore for the Schoolmaster and his attempt to send the child to her with all her little belongings neatly mended and in order.

There was silence a moment. Then Deirdre started away from her.

"I don't want to stay here!" she cried.

"Deirdre!" Mrs. Cameron was amazed at the change that had come over the sunny, little face.

"I want Dan! I want to go home," Deirdre cried passionately. "I don't want to stay here. I don't want to be like you! I want—want Dan."

She brushed past Mrs. Cameron and ran out of the house. Mrs. Cameron went after her, calling her, but Deirdre, a light, flying figure, ran on, sobbing; the trees swallowed her.

"Where's the child?" Davey asked, with the easy superiority of his extra years, when he came down from the stables and found his mother standing at the gate, looking down the track Deirdre and he had just come by.

"She's gone, Davey," Mrs. Cameron cried distressfully.

"Gone—where?"

"Home!"

"She went down the track?" he asked.

Mrs. Cameron nodded, tears of disappointment in her eyes. She had been looking forward to having a little girl to teach and look after as though she were her own.

Davey set off at a run.

It was nearly an hour later that he returned, a kicking, struggling, scratching, little creature in his arms. He released his hold of her as he entered the kitchen, threw her from him, and slammed the door behind him.

"There, scratch cat!" he cried fiercely. "Next time you try to run away remember what the Schoolmaster said: 'If you love me, Deirdre, you'll be good to Mrs. Cameron and do what she wants you to!'"

Deirdre had dropped to the floor and was crying, wildly, furiously.

Davey stared at her.

"If you don't stop that howling and yelling at once, I'll ride over and tell him how you're behaving," he said. "And then what'll he say?"

Deirdre's sobbing subsided.

There was a heavy step outside. Donald Cameron opened the kitchen door.

"What's this?" he asked, looking down on the huddled heap on the floor that was Deirdre. He glanced questioningly from his wife to Davey.

"It's the Schoolmaster's little girl!" Mrs. Cameron explained. "She's never been away from him before, and——"

"Well, we can't have this noise in the place," he said irritably.

Deirdre had looked up at the sound of that harsh voice. The sight of Davey's father quelled her.

"Take her away and see that she gets ready for tea, Davey," Mrs. Cameron said anxiously.

Although Deirdre made no more noise, she sat shivering and quivering all the evening, her eyes vacant of all but an inexpressible misery, her thin little body shaken by long, gasping breaths. Mrs. Cameron tried to comfort and console her, talking to her gently and lovingly as she put her to bed, but the child's mind was adamant.

"I want Dan! I want Dan!" she sobbed.

And in the morning when Mrs. Cameron went into her room, the window was open and the little white bed empty.

CHAPTER XI

AT school next morning Jessie Ross ran up to Davey, her fair plaits flying.

"I'm to go home with you after school, Davey Cameron," she cried eagerly. "My mother wants your mother to give her the recipe for making cough-mixture out of gum leaves."

"All right," said Davey.

It was a very dismal morning in the school-room. The Schoolmaster's face was dark with displeasure, and it was a very sullen, drooping Deirdre who took her seat beside Davey.

"After school I'm going to drive over to see your mother, Davey," Mr. Farrel said. "I must ask her pardon for what happened last night. I am grieved and ashamed beyond measure that Deirdre——"

His look of reproach went into Deirdre's heart. With a wailing cry she burst into tears again.

Davey, after his first glance at her, kept his eyes on his book; he tried not to see her, or hear her sobbing beside him. His heart was hot against Mr. Farrel. For, after all, it was because she loved the Schoolmaster so much and could not bear to be separated from him that Deirdre was crying like this, he told himself. It was hard that Mr. Farrel should be angry with her as well as everybody else when she had made everybody angry with her on his account.

But the sight of Deirdre's grief was more than the Schoolmaster could bear either. He lifted her out of

her seat and carried her off to the far end of the room. He sat there with her on his knee talking to her for awhile. Once Davey glanced in their direction; but he looked away quickly. He had seen tears on the Schoolmaster's lean, swarthy cheeks and Deirdre's face lifted to his with a penitent radiance, and tear-wet eyes, shining. The joy of being folded into his love again had banished the desolation and bleak misery from her face.

When school was out, Jess clambered into the spring-cart Davey had come to school in that day, and perched herself on the high seat.

The Schoolmaster and Deirdre followed them along the road a little later.

Lass went without any flicking with a switch, or mirthful goading of hard young heels that afternoon. Davey brooded over the tragedy of Deirdre's having to become domesticated, and of her love for her father that made it unendurable for her to be away from him even for a night. Since he had forgiven her and they had come to an understanding, she had eyes for nobody else. Her eyes had followed him all the afternoon, still swimming with tears, an adoring light in them. Davey's young male instinct was piqued. He had had no existence for her; yet he had always been her play-mate, and felt for her more than anybody else—even the Schoolmaster, he was sure.

Jess jolted up and down contentedly on the seat beside him. The ends of her little fair pig-tails flipped his arm. She chatted gaily.

"I like you better than any of the other boys at school, Davey," she said with innocent candour. "I think you're the nicest boy, and I'll marry you when I grow up. Mother says you kissed me once when I was quite a little girl. And boys only kiss girls who are their sweethearts, don't they, Davey?"

"No. I don't know," Davey muttered.

Jessie Ross was a fair, tidy-looking little girl, with home-made stockings and black boots on her dangling feet. Her round little face never freckled, nor got sun-burnt, though she only wore a hat or bonnet in the summer time. Her skin was prettily coloured and her grey-blue eyes smiled up at him easily.

It pleased Davey to think that she thought he was "the nicest boy." He smiled sheepishly. It was good to think that somebody liked him. He looked round to see how far behind the Schoolmaster and Deirdre were. They were not very far. He saw Deirdre leaning happily against her father, although in her hand—Davey's eyes lighted—was the red bundle.

He clucked and whistled to Lass.

"Gee-up! Gee-up, old Lazybones!" he called cheerily.

Jess chirruped after him :

"Gee-up! Gee-up, old Lazybones!"

"You don't like Deirdre better than me, do you, Davey?" she asked.

"No," said Davey in his newly-won good humour and sore at Deirdre's indifference to his attempts to attract her attention all day.

"The Schoolmaster means she's to stay with us anyway," he thought.

Jess sighed.

"Then if you like me, you can kiss me again, Davey," she said.

"Eh?"

Davey looked scared.

"Well, then, I'll kiss you," Jess said gaily and forthwith did.

Davey felt himself grow hot and red.

Jess laughed delightedly.

" Oh you look so funny, Davey ! " she cried. " Mick doesn't look like that when I kiss him."

Jess was only a kid, Davey told himself, and because she had brothers and kissed them, thought she could kiss other boys. Yet her gay little peck at his cheek had not displeased him. He wondered whether Deirdre and the Schoolmaster had seen it.

Davey got out of the cart to swing open the long gate. He left it open for the Schoolmaster. Mrs. Cameron came into the yard.

Jess jumped out of the cart and ran to her.

" Mother says, Mrs. Cameron dear," she cried, " would you please give her the recipe for making cough-mixture with gum leaves. And she sends her love and hopes you are well—as she is—and our black cow has a calf, and I found thirteen eggs in a nest in the creek paddock, and Mick killed a snake, five-foot long, under the verandah on Sunday."

Mrs. Cameron smiled and kissed her. Jess snuggled affectionately against her.

" The Schoolmaster's bringing Deirdre," Davey said.

Mrs. Cameron's eyes flew along the track to the other cart that was coming slowly up the hillside.

Davey took charge of the Schoolmaster's horse. Mrs. Cameron and he and the children went indoors.

" I've come to apologise, Mrs. Cameron, for Deirdre's rudeness last night," the Schoolmaster said gravely. " It was very good of you to say that you would teach her what I so much want her to know. I hope that you will forgive her and——"

His voice trembled.

" Deirdre, you've got something to say to Mrs. Cameron yourself, haven't you ? "

" I'm sorry ! " Deirdre cried, with a dry, breathless gasp. Her face had whitened ; the misery had come into

her eyes again. They went appealingly to the Schoolmaster and back to Mrs. Cameron's face.

"Will you—forgive me and teach me to cook and sew and be a good housewife," she sobbed, as if she were repeating a lesson.

"Poor child!"

Mrs. Cameron's compassionate gaze turned from Deirdre to the Schoolmaster.

"Do you really think you ought to?" she asked.

"So help me God, ma'am," he said, struggling with his emotion. "This is the only chance I've got of making a decent woman of her—your influence—if you will use it. I don't want her to be a hoyden always. She must be gentled and tamed, and if you will be as good as to help me——"

He stopped abruptly.

"You will forgive me. Good-day," he said, and went out of the room.

Deirdre made a quick, passionate gesture after him. She did not call him, but a sob broke as she stood staring after him. She ran into the garden to watch the cart with him in it go down the hillside and slip out of sight among the trees; then she threw herself on the grass and sobbed broken-heartedly.

Davey moved to go out to her.

"Leave her alone," his mother said gently, "it's best to let her get over it by herself, Davey."

Jess flew backwards and forwards helping to set the table. She delighted in making herself useful.

"Oh, Mrs. Cameron, what a funny salt-cellar," she cried. "We've got two blue ones and a big new lamp mother got at the Port!"

Mrs. Cameron looked from the tear-stained, grief-torn face of the Schoolmaster's little daughter to the plump, rosy-cheeked, happily-smiling child of her nearest

and most prosperous neighbour, and sighed. When the tea was made, she and the children sat round the table for their meal.

Donald Cameron was away and not expected home for a day or two.

Deirdre tried to eat when she was told to, but her lips quivered. She choked over the mouthfuls of food she swallowed. Mrs. Cameron put her arms round her ; but Deirdre stiffened against their gentle pressure. She would not be comforted. Davey stared at her miserably.

Only Jess chattered on artlessly, taking no notice of her, eating all her bread and butter, and drinking her milk and water, saying her grace and asking to be excused from the table when she had finished her meal—as though she were demonstrating generally how a nice, well-mannered child ought to behave. She had the other bed in the room in which Deirdre had been put to sleep the night before.

Mrs. Cameron kissed them both good-night.

Jess responded eagerly to her caress. She threw her arms round Mrs. Cameron's neck and rubbed her soft little face against hers, purring affectionately.

" I do love you, Mrs. Cameron, dear," she whispered. " Good-night."

Deirdre submitted to the good-night kiss ; she did not respond to it. Of Davey she took no notice when she went to the little room she and Jess were to sleep in. Jess held up her face for him to kiss as Mrs. Cameron had done, but he turned away brusquely, as if he did not see it, and she ran off crying gaily :

" Good-night, Davey Jones,
And sweet sleep rest your bones."

Jess undressed methodically. As she took off each garment she folded it and laid it neatly on the chair

beside her bed. When she had on her little night-gown of unbleached calico, she brushed her hair and plaited it again so that it hung in two braids on either side of her face. Then she knelt down by her bedside, folded her hands together, and prayed aloud.

She got into bed and looked at Deirdre across the patchwork quilt, conscious of having performed her whole duty for the day.

"Aren't you sorry you're such a bad, naughty, wicked, little girl?" she asked.

Deirdre's sobs were her only answer.

"God doesn't love you, and I don't, and Mrs. Cameron and Davey don't love you either. Nobody loves bad, wicked, naughty little girls," Jess said solemnly.

She put her head on the pillow and was sleeping, sweetly, peacefully, in a few minutes.

Deirdre crept to the open window. She gazed out of it at the dark heave of the forest that cut her off from the being she loved and the hut in the clearing behind the school. The blue night sky that spread over her was spread over the hut in the clearing and the school too, she knew. They were not many miles away, the hut, the clearing, and the school. From gazing steadily before her and realising that fact, she glanced from the window to the ground. It was such a little distance.

Davey, going to bed in a loft in the barn saw her standing at the window, and watched her, a troubled pain at her suffering gripping his heart.

When she dropped from the window into the garden he was beside her in an instant. He caught her sobbing breath as he touched her.

"You're not going home, Deirdre?" he asked.

"Yes!" she panted, her eyes wide and dark with anguish. "I can't bear it, Davey. I can't breathe."

"He'll be angry," Davey said.

"Yes." She cried and sobbed quietly for a moment. "But I'd rather he'd be angry than send me away from him."

"It'll be morning soon. If you walked you wouldn't be home any earlier than if you waited for us to go to school," Davey said, with rare subtlety. "The School-master won't be angry if you wait till then, Deirdre, and——" A brilliant inspiration came to him. "I'll bring Lass in an hour earlier and we can start then."

"True, Davey?"

Her eyes questioned him tragically.

"True as death!" he said, and struck his breast three times.

She turned to go back to the bedroom.

"I'm sorry—that sorry, Deirdre," he cried, fumbling for words, and unable to express his sympathy.

She did not turn or look back at him as she clambered in the window; but her face in the morning showed that she understood his championship. She turned to him eagerly when she saw him at breakfast, a subdued gratitude in her eyes. Davey thought that she had at last recognised in him a friend to whom she could turn when everybody's hand was against her.

CHAPTER XII

FOR months Davey and Deirdre went together along the winding tracks, from the school to Cameron's and from Cameron's to school, sometimes in the spring-cart, but more often on Lass's broad back.

Deirdre had to hang on to Davey when the old horse took it into her head to step out jauntily, but for the most part they rode her lightly enough, Davey with one hand on her mane and Deirdre swinging behind him.

Sometimes Davey dug his heels into her fat sides and put her at a trot that set them bumping up and down like peas in a box, and laughing till the hills echoed. And sometimes in the middle of the fun they found themselves shot on the roadside, as Lass shied and propped, pretending to be startled by a wallaby or a dead tree. These comfortable, middle-aged shies and proppings were regarded as her little joke, her way of indicating that she did not like being dug in the sides. They shrieked with laughter as she stood blinking at them, her white-lashed eyes, on which a chalky whiteness was growing, bland and innocent.

"As if she were so surprised—and hadn't done it all of a purpose," they explained to each other.

Deirdre quickly outgrew the dresses that Mrs. Cameron had first made for her. The Schoolmaster thought that Davey was growing too. Although Lass was up to the weight of the two, and they ran beside her up the hill-sides as often as not, and rode her only one at a time

as they grew older, with keen eyes for a fair thing where a horse was concerned, the Schoolmaster bought a little wilding of a white-stockinged chestnut for Deirdre to ride. A stockman had traded the colt for a bottle of rum when his mare foaled at Steve's. She was a fine animal with a strain of Arab in her, and when the Schoolmaster had mouthed and gentled White Socks, as Deirdre christened the colt, she straddled him bare-back and Davey had his old Lass to himself.

There was nothing for him to do but watch Deirdre as she went off down the track clinging lightly to the little horse whose legs spread out like the wings of a bird. Davey's heart sickened with envy every time Deirdre dashed past him. He urged Lass to the limit of her heavy, clompering gait; but even then she did not keep the chestnut in sight, and all but broke a blood vessel in the attempt. When Davey came up to her, Deirdre was invariably twisted round, waiting for him, brilliant-eyed, a wind-whipped colour in her cheeks, and her hair flying about her.

"You'll break your neck some day, riding like that," he told her, sombrely.

But he was eating his heart out at not having a horse to put against hers, at not being able to send flying the pebbles on the hill tracks as she did. He had asked his father over and over again for a horse of his own, but Donald Cameron would not give him one.

"No, my lad," he said shrewdly. "I'm not going to have you racing horses of mine on these roads with the Schoolmaster's girl—breaking their knees and windin' them. I haven't money to throw away, if the Schoolmaster has. By and by, when you're working with me, you'll have a good steady-going stock horse of y're own—maybe."

Davey's school days were numbered, Mrs. Cameron knew. He was shooting up into a long, straggling youth. His father was talking of breaking him into the work of the place, and Davey was beginning to be restive at school, wanting to do man's work and get a horse of his own.

Deirdre learnt womanly ways about a house quickly enough when she had made up her mind to. Although since the new order of things at Ayrmuir, Mrs. Cameron had Jenny, a big, raw-boned, brown-eyed girl from the Wirree, to help her, and the family had meals in the parlour, and sat on the best shiny, black horse-hair furniture every day, Deirdre made beds, dusted and swept with Mrs. Cameron. She fed the fowls and learnt to cook and sew. Davey had seen her churning, sleeves rolled up from her long, thin arms; he had watched her and his mother working-up shapeless masses of butter in the cool dark of the dairy. When they washed clothes in tubs on the hillside, he carried buckets of water for them and had helped to hang the clean, heavy, wet things on lines between the trees; or to spread them on the grass to sun-bleach. Mrs. Cameron had taught Deirdre to knit, and when her husband was not at home had even taken her spinning wheel from under its covers, set it up in the garden and showed her how to use it. She had sat quite a long time at it, spinning, and delighting in its old friendly purr and clatter.

At such times she would sing softly to herself, Davey and Deirdre crouched on the grass beside her, and, when they begged for them, she would tell some of the fairy tales they loved to hear.

Mrs. Cameron scarcely ever saw the Schoolmaster, and it was rarely then that she spoke to him. Sometimes she discovered him in the background of a gathering of

hill folk who met in the school-room on Sundays for hymns, prayers and a reading of the Scriptures, and sometimes she heard him singing in the distance as he rode along the hill roads. Deirdre had sensed a reserve in Mrs. Cameron's manner and attitude towards her father, and could not forgive her for it, though she had a shy, half-grateful affection for her.

Davey was not sure that he liked the Deirdre who had learnt to brush her hair and wear woman's clothes as well as the old Deirdre. There was something more subdued about her; her laughter was rarer, though it had still the catch and ripple of a wild bird's song. She was not quite tamed, however, for all that she did, deftly and quickly though it was done, had a certain wild grace.

It was one evening when she was knitting—making a pair of socks for the Schoolmaster—and muttering to herself: “Knit one, slip one, knit one, two together, slip one,” that he realised Deirdre was going a woman's way and that he had to go a man's.

“It'll be moonlight early to-night, and there'll be dozens of 'possums in the white gums near the creek, Deirdre,” he said, coming to her eagerly.

The proposition of a 'possum hunt had always been irresistible. Deirdre had loved to crouch in the bushes with him on moonlight nights and watch the little creatures at play on the high branches of trees near the edge of the clearing. They had flung knobby pieces of wood at them, or catapulted them, and were rejoiced beyond measure when a shot told, there was a startled scream among the 'possums and a little grey body tumbled from a bough in the moonlight to the dark earth.

But this night Deirdre shook her head, and went on with her murmuring of: "Knit one, slip one, knit one, two together, slip one."

"No, I can't go 'possuming to-night, Davey," she said. "I want to finish turning this heel."

CHAPTER XIII

THE summer of Davey's first year's work with his father was the driest the early settlers had known in the South.

A breathless, insistent heat brooded over the hills, their narrow valleys and the long, bare Wirree plains. The grass stood stiff and straw-like by the roads and in the cleared paddocks, rustling when anything moved in it. Hordes of straw-coloured grasshoppers lay in it, whistling and whispering huskily, or rose with whirring wings when anything disturbed them. The skies, faded to grey, gave no promise of rain, and when the sun set it left a dull, angry flush—the colour of a black snake's belly—behind the hills.

The lesser mountain streams dried up. The creek that ran through Cameron's paddocks became a mere trickle. There was only one deep pool left of it. In that only enough water remained to keep the household going for a month, when Donald Cameron mustered, and he, Davey, and the stockmen drove the cattle to the Clearwater River, ten miles away to the south-west. It was still in good condition and Cameron held three hundred acres of the river frontage there. He was better off than most of the hill folk who, after driving their cattle a dozen miles or so for water, had to pay high prices for paddocks to run them in.

Every man of Cameron's was away at the Clearwater, and Mrs. Cameron and Jenny alone at the homestead, the afternoon that Deirdre came riding up out of the misty depths of the trees.

For days a heavy, yellowish-grey haze had covered the hills. Mrs. Cameron could not from her doorway see the slopes of the ranges behind the house. The mist hung like a pall over the trees, seeming to stifle the wild life of them. Not a twitter of birds was heard. Parroquets, breaking the dun-coloured mist with the scarlet and blue and green of their wings and breasts, dashed over the clearing, chattering hoarsely. Now and then they rose from the orchard with shrill screams, as Jenny drove them away from the few shrivelled plums left on the trees by flapping a dish-cloth at them. The air was full of the smell of burning.

"The fires have been bad on the other side of the ranges," Deirdre told Mrs. Cameron, as she came into the yard and slipped her bridle from Socks' neck. "Father is taking our poddies and cows, and Steve's, to the Clear-water."

"Yes," Mrs. Cameron said, "some men on the roads told us a few days ago that we'd better get our beasts out of the back paddocks in case the fires come this way."

Deirdre caught Socks by his forelock; but instead of turning him into the paddock behind the stables as she ordinarily did, she led him into one of the fern-spread, earthen-floored stalls and slammed the door on him.

"A man at Steve's this morning said some of the people on the other side 've been burnt out," she said. "The fires swept over the bush as if it were a grass paddock. Martin's, at Dale, is burnt down, and he said that some of the children going home from the Dale school were burnt to death."

Mrs. Cameron exclaimed distressfully.

"The fires came up so quickly they couldn't get home before them," Deirdre continued. "And when they turned to go back the flames were all round. Father sent

me up. Davey and Mr. Cameron being away, he thought you mightn't know."

"If the fires are at Dale——"

There was a flicker of anxiety in Mrs. Cameron's eyes.

"They've travelled over forty miles already," Deirdre said. "And father says if the wind changes we'll get them up here for sure. They may sweep right on, as it is, and miss us. But he said it would be madness to try to fight them—with only the three of us, and if they do come this way to get down to the pool at once. He said he'd try to get here if the wind changes."

Once or twice there had been scrub fires in the summer, and Mrs. Cameron, with everybody else on the place, had helped to beat out the quickly-running, forked flames which tried to make their way across the paddocks of the clearing to the house and sheds. She had carried water for the men beating, when there was water to spare, and they had dipped their bags and branches of green gum leaves into the water and slashed at the flames in the grass.

"There are beaters and bags by the barn," she said, "I cut the beaters after Davey and his father had gone, thinking we might want them."

She meant to make a fight for her home if the fires came that way, Deirdre realised.

The afternoon wore away slowly. Mrs. Cameron had few treasures; but she made a bundle of them—a Bible, some of Davey's baby clothes, an old-fashioned gold-rimmed brooch with a mosaic on black stone that Donald Cameron had given her and desired her to wear with the black silk dress he had insisted on her having and appearing in, occasionally, when people began to call him the Laird of Ayrmuir. The dress was more an object of veneration than anything else; but she wrapped it, and the ribband and the piece of lace that she wore

with it, into the bundle, and put them, with her spinning wheel and a pair of blue vases that had been her first parlour ornaments, on the back verandah where they would be easy to get if the fires threatened the house.

Deirdre moved restlessly about out of doors, watching the haze on every side of the clearing for any sign of a break in it.

"Are there any animals on the place, Mrs. Cameron?" she asked, late in the afternoon.

"Only a couple of cows and Lass," Mrs. Cameron replied. "They're in the top paddock."

"I'll run them down," Deirdre said.

Straddling Socks, and calling to the toothless old cattle dog who lay dozing on his paws before the kitchen door, she went to the hill-top and brought down the cows and Lass a few minutes later.

"Keep 'em there, Jock!" she said and left the old dog shepherding them in the yard behind the barns.

While she was away, Mrs. Cameron and Jenny had bundled half a dozen hens and a game rooster into a big wicker crate.

Just before sunset they went to the hill-top together, Mrs. Cameron and Deirdre, and Jenny buzzing before them.

Not a puff of air stirred the tawny curtain that obscured the hills. At a little distance the trees stood motionless. The light leaves of the young gum saplings hung, down-pointed, with a stillness that had tragedy in it. Faint and far away in the silence though was a rushing murmur. The smell of burning that had been in the air for days came with a harsher tang. Darkness was making way against the smoke-haze.

Neither Deirdre nor Mrs. Cameron spoke, staring into it.

A flock of parroquets flew out of the haze and scattered across the clearing with shrill, startled screams. A little

brown feathered bird dropped into the grass. Deirdre picked it up.

"Its wings are singed," she said quickly, "and they're quite hot still! It can't have flown far."

Tense and alert, she threw back her head. A puff of wind, feather light, almost imperceptible, touched her face,

"It's coming from the west," she breathed.

"Will you take the animals to the pool, Deirdre," Mrs. Cameron said sharply. "Jock'll keep them there. Jenny, you bring the beaters up here. I'll stay and watch to see if the fire breaks. If the wind's from the west, it'll strike us first here."

CHAPTER XIV

WHEN Deirdre returned from the pool, where she had left Lass, the crate of fowls, and the cows with the old dog standing guard over them, Mrs. Cameron was already beating an arrow of flame that had struck the paddock on the hill-top, and Jenny on the other edge of the fences was also beating.

Darkness had fallen. The glare of the fire was visible above the thick standing wall of haze.

Deirdre saw a glittering line break through the grass at a little distance from Mrs. Cameron, and seizing one of the green branches Jenny had thrown down in the centre of the paddock, beat the fire until it went out. Other threads of fire appeared near her, and she followed them along the fence, slashing with the branch until they died down, leaving blackened earth and breaths of virulent blue smoke.

"Stay near the top of the hill, Deirdre," Mrs. Cameron called, "and watch to see if there's a break on the front clearing, or the pool side, or near the sheds!"

Then the fire began to show in a dozen places at once, wriggling lizard-like through the dry, palely-gleaming grass. Beating became automatic, an unflagging lashing and thrashing, and watch had to be kept that the enemy was not attacking in another part of the clearing. The blackened earth smoked under a dead flame one moment, the next a spark kindled and wispish fire was running through the grass again. Far down the hillside, through the smoke mists, to Deirdre on the top, Mrs. Cameron

and Jenny looked wraith-like in their white cotton dresses.

The fire in the trees, of which these swift, silent runners in the grass were fore-warners, was still some distance off. But they could hear the crash of falling trees, the rush and roar of the flames in the tangled leafage, shrill cries of the wild creatures of the bush, the blare and bellowing screams of cattle.

Mrs. Cameron's light skirt caught fire. Jenny beat it out with her hands. She and Mrs. Cameron fell back a moment.

The glare lighted the whole of the clearing. In the valley flashing shafts of flame could be seen. They leapt athwart clouds of smoke which drove, billowing, across the sky, sprayed by showers of sparks.

"Mrs. Cameron!" Deirdre screamed warningly as a fire-maddened steer leapt into the paddock and careered across it into the darkness on the other side.

The heat was suffocating. The heavy, acrid smoke in their lungs made their heads reel. Deirdre was fighting a brilliant patch of flames half-way across the paddock when Mrs. Cameron called to her.

"It's no good, child!" she said. Her face was dim with smoke, her hands burnt and blackened. "It's no good trying to do any more, we must go now."

They ran from the hill-top to the house, Mrs. Cameron caught up her bundle, Jenny, the blue vases and the spinning wheel, and Deirdre, taking Socks from the stable in which he was beginning to whinny with fear, led him down the track in front of the house. They were half way across the clearing when Mrs. Cameron came to a standstill. Flames had eaten their way up the paddock and lay across the track.

"We're cut off," she said.

"What can we do?" Deirdre asked. "There's no time to lose."

Jenny screamed, dancing up and down, beside herself with terror and excitement: "We're cut off! Cut off!"

She dropped one of the vases she was carrying, and it broke in a thousand pieces.

"I don't know," Mrs. Cameron said slowly. Her eyes wandered to the broken pieces of the vase.

For a moment Deirdre's brain was paralysed too. She stood staring down the track. All the terrible stories of the fires, of people who had been burnt to death, flashed into her mind.

A shout was raised behind them.

"It's father!" she cried.

The Schoolmaster dashed round the corner of the house. His face was blackened and had angry weals where the fire had lashed it. His eyebrows and beard were singed close to his head. At a glance he took in the situation. His horse with head hung was blowing like a bellows.

"Davey's just behind me!" he gasped, looking at Mrs. Cameron. "Mr. Cameron and he didn't know the fires were making this way till I told them; then he sent Davey. I came . . . to give him a hand. Never thought we'd get here—miles of fire across the road. Get a couple of blankets, Deirdre, and we'll make a dash for the creek."

Deirdre ran back to the house, tore the blankets from the beds inside and threw them on to the verandah. He dipped three of them in a bucket of water that stood by the kitchen door, wrapped her in one, and Mrs. Cameron and Jenny in the others.

Davey swung into the yard on an all but spent horse.

"Keep her going, Davey," the Schoolmaster cried, "and get down to the water. I'll look after your mother. Deirdre, you take Jenny up behind you. Fly along and let down the slip panel. Socks'll stand the grass fire if you keep him at it."

Davey and Deirdre dashed across the smouldering and smoking paddock, putting their horses blindly towards the corner of the fence where the slip-rails were already down.

Trees on the edge of the clearing behind the house were already roaring, wrapped in the smoke and flaming mantle of the fire. A shower of sparks thrown up by a falling tree scattered over the stable and barns.

A hoarse yelping, the cackling of fowls and the wild terrified lowing of the cows, came from the pool. Davey rode into it, hustled the cows into the centre, and took the old sheep-dog up on his saddle. Socks, with Deirdre and Jenny on his back, splashed in after him. The Schoolmaster and Mrs. Cameron followed a few moments later. He had caught up her spinning wheel and she was clutching her bundle and the other blue vase.

CHAPTER XV

THE fire did not reach the trees above the pool till it had swept the orchards, sheds, and house on the brow of the hill.

Mrs. Cameron watched it devouring them. Every line of the sheds and barns, the eaves and corners of the home that Donald and she had made, was struck against the glare.

The stables fell with a crash. Flames went up from the new weather-board corner of the house.

"It's like watching someone you love die slowly," she cried.

A breath of wind brought a shower of blackened and burning leaves. By a flank movement the fire was sweeping towards them. The wind springing up gave it zest; it sprang in long brilliant leaps over the quivering tops of the trees. Davey and the Schoolmaster dropped from their horses. Mrs. Cameron, Deirdre and Jenny crouched in the water till the fury of the flames had passed over their heads. Davey had his hands full to keep the cows from breaking away, mad with terror. Socks, the most restive and mettlesome of the horses, started and whinnied as burning leaves struck him. Deirdre threw her wet blanket over him and cowered next to him under it, murmuring soothingly: "There now! Steady, old boy! Steady, my pretty!"

The Schoolmaster held his own horse and Lass, startled out of her peaceful phlegm by the terrifying roar and heat.

Even when the flames had raced on over the tree-tops it was not safe to leave the pool. The men and women in it stood in water to their waists for hours, a red haze enveloping them. The blankets dried in a few minutes. The bush behind them through which the fire had passed showed trees stripped of their greenery and outlined with glowing embers. Some of the dead trees beside the pool burned dully, and fluttering red and blackened leaves drifted from the saplings.

Once Jenny had to dip to her neck as a spark of fire caught her dress.

"Look out, Mrs. Cameron!" Deirdre cried sharply, hearing a crack and seeing a glowing bough waver over Davey's mother.

The Schoolmaster brushed Mrs. Cameron aside, and the bough struck his face. Deirdre uttered a low cry. Davey, too, had seen the Schoolmaster's movement.

"Are you hurt, Mr. Farrel?" he asked anxiously.

"No, it isn't anything at all!" the Schoolmaster replied brusquely, with a half laugh.

Mrs. Cameron herself did not realise what had happened.

To the glare of the fire and the hot red mists, a few hours before dawn, succeeded a heavy darkness, lit only by the columns of dead trees burning to ember.

The night seemed endless. When the first wavering gleam came in the eastern sky it revealed the blackened fringe of the trees, their green waving draperies scorched and fire-eaten, where the fire, like a ravening monster, had half-consumed them and passed on.

The wind had swept the haze and the smoke before it. The bosom of the earth lay bare of the light, dry, wanly-golden grass that had covered it; and from the paddocks and blackened forest thin spirals and breaths of bluish smoke rose and drifted. The peaceful space of

trees and the summer-dried grasses about the Ayrmuir homestead were gone. Charred outlines of sheds and what of the house was still left, stood on the brow of the hill.

In the wan light, the pool mirrored the desolation and the haggard and weary men and women who stood in it. Chilled and cramped from being in the water so long, exhausted with the anxieties of the night, they ventured warily back to the still hot earth.

Mrs. Cameron's eyes turned first to her son. His face was grimed with smoke and leaf smuts. There were angry red flushes on it where scraps of burning foliage had struck him. Deirdre's and Jenny's clothes hung to them, scorched and dripping; there were burnt holes in Mrs. Cameron's own dress. Farrel and Davey were drenched to the skin.

The Schoolmaster had tied a handkerchief over his face, covering one eye.

In the first light of the dawn Deirdre exclaimed when she saw it.

"Father," she cried, "you're hurt."

"I'm all right," he said irritably.

She went over to him and lifted the handkerchief.

His face was curiously wrung with pain and blanched beneath the tan and smoke-grime. A clammy sweat beaded on his forehead.

"Hold your tongue, Deirdre," he muttered. "It's only a bit of a burn."

Mrs. Cameron was gazing at the ruins of her home.

"What is it?" she asked, hearing his voice, low as it was pitched. "Oh, you've got a bad burn?"

She went towards him, distress in her eyes.

"It's nothing at all; it doesn't matter!" He edged away from her so that she should not see. "When you and Davey are fixed up, Mrs. Cameron, Deirdre and I

must get along and see how Steve and the school fared."

They found some flour, bread and tea in stone jars among the ruins of the kitchen. Davey milked the cows. Mrs. Cameron and Jenny built a fire in the yard, and when they had all breakfasted on the scorched bread and some tea, Mrs. Cameron wanted to put flour on the Schoolmaster's burn. But he said that it was not worth bothering about and would have nothing done for it.

CHAPTER XVI

FOR months after the fires every settler in the hills was felling and carting timber. New homes were built on the débris of the old. Scarcely a house in the district had escaped the hunger of the flames. A burnt-out family lived in a tent, in a lean-to of bagging and bark, or in what was left of the walls, roofs and doors of houses, jammed together to form some sort of shelter against the weather.

Every pair of hands were busy trying to get the new homes up before the autumn rains; and money was scarce. Most of the settlers had lost cattle and horses as well as their homesteads, sheds and crops.

The wind that had driven the smoke and flames billowing before it brought a downpour which quenched the fire the morning after it had swept the southern slopes of the hills. For days it rained steadily. Light vertical showers soaked into the blackened earth. There was every prospect of a good season to make up for the damage done by the fires. Rain on fired earth makes for fertility, good grain, fat stock and an abundant harvest. The settlers worked like beavers to be ready for it, the prospect of a good season heartening their labours and leavening their disappointment at having again to do all the building and fencing that had been done only a few years before.

The only places in the district that remained a charred monument to the fires were the school and the school-master's cottage.

The Schoolmaster and Deirdre were living at Steve's again. By a miracle the shanty had escaped the fires ; it remained standing when scarcely another house in the countryside did. Steve and two teamsters who had been hung-up on the roads had spent the night watching that flying sparks did not catch its splintery grey shingles. A corrugated iron roof had saved it, they said, although there was a good clearing on either side of the shanty.

For the first few days after the fires, while the rain lasted, Steve's had been stretched to the limit of its capacity to shelter homeless men, women and children. The men camped as best they might in the bar, in the kitchen, and on the verandahs. Mrs. Ross, Jess, Deirdre, and Mrs. Mackay, her baby, and three small boys, slept in one room. And when Steve heard that Mrs. Morrison and Kitty, who had wrapped themselves in wet blankets and crept into a corrugated iron tank while the fires were raging around them, had no shelter but the tank during the rain, the Schoolmaster went to bring them into the shanty, and Steve and the Ross boys rigged a wind and rain screen of boughs and bagging round the verandah to make another room for them.

Deirdre took charge of the domestic arrangements, though everybody lent a hand. Notwithstanding the terrible experiences every member of the house party had passed through, there was much more laughing than sighing, much more finding of humour in every phase of awkward predicaments than dilating on dangers and difficulties. Losses were discussed as the women helped Deirdre to make big, savoury stews and put bumper loaves on the ashes of Steve's hearth, but it was always with concluding exclamations of gratitude that "things were no worse." At Dale, only a few miles on the other side of the ranges, three mothers were weeping for little ones caught in the flames and burnt to death on their

way home from school. No lives had been lost on the southern slope of the hills.

All day the men were out riding in the rain, trying to get a better idea of the damage done. They ran up fences, mustered stray cattle, and in the evening brought back pitiful accounts of beasts burned to death in the gullies and dry creek-beds. When they sat with the women round the fire in Steve's kitchen, their great, green-hide boots steaming before it, breathless stories of fights with the fires were told. Most of the men had been away taking cattle to water when the homesteads were attacked. The flames had leapt the crest of the range and circled the clearings with incredible speed. The women had to do the best they could to save the children, the animals left on the farms, and the buildings, and many a good fight had been waged before they sought safety themselves.

It rained steadily for three days; then the sunshine gleamed and Steve's house-party broke up.

The men, restless and eager to repair the damage that had been done, were off at dawn; the women and children followed a few hours later, in lumbering carts and carryalls. Some of them were going to make a lean-to of boughs and bagging, or of oilskins before night, and some were going for stores to the Port, or to the new township that was springing up about the Wirree river. There was bound to be plenty of work for every pair of hands for months to come.

While everybody was busy, felling, fencing, splitting, and running up new buildings, it was rumoured that the Schoolmaster and Deirdre were going to leave the hills.

CHAPTER XVII

DAVEY had said good-bye to the Schoolmaster.

"Well, I'll be going now," he said, moving away clumsily.

He had said all he could, though there was not much of that. Most of what he wanted to say remained deep within him. He could not dig it up. The words to express his feeling would not come. He had muttered something about "passing that way" and having come in "to say good-bye," when he entered the big, bare room at Steve's.

He had not seen Deirdre, nor the Schoolmaster, since the night of the fires. His father had kept him busy; and with all the work of the new buildings going up at Ayrmuir there was plenty to do. He talked of it for a while in a strained, uninterested fashion.

"Deirdre told me mother put up a great fight for the house," he said, "but of course the old man doesn't give her credit for that—thinks he could have saved it, if he had been on the spot in time. I wish he had been there. I'd like to 've seen if he could 've beaten a fire—with that wind against him. I might've been with mother a bit earlier and been able to help her, if I'd had a decent nag—and that's what I told him—but I'm not likely to get one. The expense of the new buildings has got him down, and he's mad because Nat left a couple of hundred yearlings in one of the back paddocks. We ran in about a hundred of 'em last week—found some burnt to cinders—the others 've got away."

Awkwardly, uncertainly, he shifted his feet. He did not want to go, to say the final words, and yet he did not know how to stay. Farrel understood that and kept him talking longer. He was still wearing a bandage over his left eye.

"Your eye's all right, isn't it?" Davey asked. "It isn't seriously hurt? Mother was asking me the other day if it was better. She doesn't know how it happened, Mr. Farrel."

"How what happened?" Farrel asked.

A spasm of pain twitched his lean, sun-burnt features. He was sitting with his back to the light on a low bench under the window.

"How you got that burn about your eyes," said Davey. "But I saw. If you hadn't tried to prevent the branch falling on mother, the way she was standing, it would have come down on her face."

"It might have fallen on any of us."

The Schoolmaster spoke sharply.

"I hope you're not going to have any trouble with it," Davey said.

"No, of course not."

Dan rose from his seat under the window.

"You'll be wanting to say good-bye to Deirdre, too, won't you, Davey?"

He went across to the door and called into the next room:

"Davey's going, Deirdre!"

But though a muffled sound of someone moving came from it, there was no answer.

He called again; but still there was no reply.

"She must have gone to bring in the cows for Steve," the Schoolmaster said. "Never mind, I'll tell her you left a message for her."

"Yes," said the boy, folding and re-folding his hat.

But it did not seem the same thing as seeing Deirdre and saying good-bye to her himself.

"Mind, if there's any books you're wanting, or any way I can help you, if you want to study more, you can always let me know, and I'll be glad to do anything I can for you," the Schoolmaster said. "Steve will pass a letter on to me. I don't know where we'll settle at first, or just what we're going to do, but he'll generally know our whereabouts. And there's one other thing I'd like to say, Davey, you can always be sure of a friend in the world. If you get into a scrape, or any sort of trouble, will you remember that?"

They gripped hands.

"Thank you, Mr. Farrel," Davey muttered. "But I wish you weren't going," he added, desperately.

"I wish we weren't too," Farrel said with a sigh, "but then you see people don't want to build the school again. They don't think there's the same need for one now. Most of the girls I've been teaching for the last few years can teach the children coming on well enough. And besides, there's talk of Government schools being set up everywhere."

"Yes."

Davey's countenance was one of settled gloom.

"Good-bye."

The Schoolmaster wrung his hand.

Davey found himself lifting his rein from the docked sapling in the shanty yard.

Two other horses, with reins hung over the post, stood before Steve's bar; a couple of cattle dogs lay at their heels nosing the dust. The fowls scratching in the stable-yard spread their wings and cackled as he turned out of the yard to the road.

"So-long, Davey," the Schoolmaster called from the verandah.

"S'-long," Davey replied.

The loose gravel rolled under his mare's feet as she slipped and slid down the hill, the reins hanging loose on her neck. He looked straight before him, trying to understand the state of his mind. He had not expected to be so disturbed at taking leave of the Schoolmaster. Then he remembered that he had not seen Deirdre—to say good-bye to her, he thought.

For the first time he realised that she was going away—going out of his life. Perhaps that realisation had been at the bottom of his thought all the time; but it struck him suddenly, viciously, now.

He was looking into the distance, dazed by the tumult within him, when a blithe voice called him, and glancing up he saw Deirdre standing on the bank by the roadside.

"There you are, Davey!" she cried. "Going away without saying a word to me! I'd a good mind to let you go."

She was breathless with running across the paddocks to reach the turn in the road. The wind had blown her dark hair into little tendrils about her face, and there was a sparkle of anger in her eyes.

"I heard what you said to father," she went on, "and if you haven't anything better to say to me, I'll go back."

Davey gazed at her. He gazed as though he had never seen her before. She seemed another creature, nothing like the ragged little urchin who had climbed trees with him and ridden to school straddle-legged behind him; nothing like the sedate housewife his mother had made of her, either.

Deirdre stared at him too, as though he were quite different from the Davey she had known. A shy smile quivered on her lips. She plucked nervously at trails of the scarlet-runners which overhung the bank,

and put the end of a runner between her teeth and chewed the stalk.

Davey saw that her lips were as scarlet as the flowers that, like broken-winged butterflies, hung at the end of the trail.

He slid off his horse and stood facing her. His limbs were trembling.

"What's the matter?" she asked, a little distress creeping into her voice.

Davey's face was tense and colourless.

To the trouble which had surprised him that day, a strange soft thrill was added when she put the runner stalk with its scarlet flowers between her teeth. It struck him with a strange pang that Deirdre was beautiful, that her lips were the same colour as the flowers hanging near them.

It was all translated, this emotion of his, in the shamed shy smile that came into his face as he stared at her.

Deirdre understood well enough.

She scrambled down the bank and went to him.

"You are sorry we're going, aren't you, Davey?" she asked.

He nodded, finding he could not speak.

The gloom of the forest was closing round them, the sunset dying. She sighed and slipped her hand into his.

After a few moments, as he said nothing, she spoke again.

"It'll be all changed, I suppose, when father and I come back," she said. "We *will* come back, by and by, sometime, you know, father says. We'll come to see Steve, perhaps. But we'll be grown up . . . quite, you and I, Davey. You'll be married, and I——"

"What?"

Davey had wakened.

"I was saying, we'll be grown-up and married, perhaps by the time we see each other again," Deirdre murmured. "None of the times'll come again like the ones when we went home on Lass, or in the spring-cart, or walked, and chased wallies and went after birds' nests. I wish they could! I wish I could be just ten when I come back and give you a race down the road, Davey."

Her voice ran on quickly, but Davey's mind stuck on her first words.

"There's only one girl I'll be married to," he said.

"Yes." Her eyes leapt to his. "Jess Ross!"

"Who says so?"

"She does." Deirdre laughed. "She says she's the only girl you've ever kissed. And her mother says——"

"When she was a kid, they put her face up to me; but I never kissed her—or any girl," Davey said.

"I didn't believe it, of course!"

Deirdre laughed softly.

"Why?"

"Well—I thought—if there was any girl you'd be wanting to kiss, it would be me, Davey!"

The bright shy glance that flew towards him, and the quiver of her lips, fired the boy.

His arms went out to her. He caught her shoulder and held her to him. For an instant he did not know whether it was night or day. But when he withdrew from that moment of unconsciousness, wild, uncontrollable joy and possession, his eyes were humid. And her eyes beneath his were like pools in the forest which the fallen-leaf mould has darkened and the twilight striking through the trees makes a dim, mysterious mirror of.

"Deirdre," he whispered, as if he had never before said her name, and to say it were like singing in church.

He kissed her again, slowly and tenderly; the first pressure of her lips had made a man of him.

"You're my sweetheart, aren't you, Deirdre?" he said exultingly, holding her in his arms and gazing down at her. "When you come back we'll be married."

"Yes," Deirdre whispered.

Her eyes reflected the glow of her heart.

"I've always meant to marry you, Davey, though I've sometimes pretended I liked Mick Ross, or Buddy Morrison better." She drew a little sigh. "But I'm so glad it's all settled, now . . . and we're really going to marry each other."

The sunset had died out of the sky, and the forest was dark about them when they kissed and whispered "good-bye—for a little while." Davey could scarcely say the words. He watched Deirdre as she fled up hill to the shanty; then leaping on his horse he sent her clattering down hill, all his young manhood—the tumult of his love, awakened senses, rejoicing and dreams—orchestrating within him.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the earliest days of Port Southern, settlers tracking inland or further along the coast, had to cross the Wirree, driving their cattle and horses before them. The shallows of the river where they crossed began to be called the Wirree Ford. The tracks converged there, and it was not long before a shanty appeared on the left bank a few hundred yards from the broad and slowly-moving river.

The Wirree came down from the hills and flowed across the plains at the foot of the ranges. The whole of the flat land it watered was spoken of as the Wirree river district, or the Wirree. The stream emptied itself into the waters of Bass Straits. Opposite was Van Dieman's Land, the beautiful green island on which penal settlements had been established. Men had been known to escape from it to the mainland. They made the dangerous passage of the Straits in open boats, and sometimes were picked up in an exhausted condition by a frigate policing the coast, or a trader, and sent back to Hobart Town or Port Arthur. Sometimes their dead bodies were tossed by the sea on the shores they had been trying to reach, and sometimes, steering by the muddy waters of the river that flowed out from the nearest point opposite the Island, bearing silt and drift-wood for a couple of miles into the sea, they reached the land of promise and freedom.

As the beaten grass path along the sea-board became the main stock route between Port Southern and Rane,

a newly-founded settlement at the further eastern end of the coast, a township of curious mushroom growth, cropped up about the Wirree Ford and McNab's shanty.

It was a collection of huts, wattle and dab, white-washed, for the most part; but some of them were of sun-baked sods, plastered together, or of the stones which were scattered over the plains or filled the creek beds. McNab's weatherboard shanty, with its sign-board of a black bull, with red-rimmed eyes on a white ground, was by far the most pretentious. The history of these dwellers about McNab's was a matter of suspicion. They arrived from nowhere, out of the night, silently, and it was surmised, crept up the river in the cockle-shell boats which had brought them over the Straits and were sunk in the slowly-moving river when they had served their purpose.

The fertile flats, stretching to the edge of the mountains, had been taken up before McNab got his holding on an arm of the Wirree. He set about acquiring the selvedge of the plains which was cut off from the finer, more arable land by a scrubby line of densely growing ti-tree. Most of the Wirree Ford men ran cattle on these strips of coarse-grassed land, thrashed by the sea breezes. But they were no sticklers for the niceties of boundaries and property laws. They drove their first, wild-eyed, scraggy herds whither they listed, a cursing, blasphemous crew, none dared gainsay them. It was reckoned better to have the good-will than the enmity of the Wirree river men. The body of a settler who had threatened "to have the law of them" for grazing their beasts on his land was, a few days afterwards, found in the river, drifting with the tide out to sea. Some of the Wirree men made a living as fishermen. Others maintained themselves by a desultory farming. They ploughed the grey land of the seaboard with wooden

hand-ploughs. But many of them thrived on what they could make out of the stockmen and drovers who passed through the township on their way to Rane or to the Port.

McNab was powerful enough even in those days, and many and ingenious were the stories he invented to account for the presence of men who came to the Wirree Ford unexpectedly.

As the settlement grew, it did justice to the rumoured accounts of its origin. McNab's was the meeting place of stockmen, drovers and teamsters on the southern roads, and the carouses held there were night-long. It was recognised as a hotbed of thieves and ruffians by the roadsters, and no man of substance or any pretensions at all, would lodge the night in any of the mud-built huts within a stone's throw of the river.

Before long, the Wirree men had fat cattle to dispose of. An open space between the huts, not far from McNab's, was used as a sale yard. It was then that settlers who wanted good prices for their beasts had to drive them to the Wirree market. A better bargain was driven in the Wirree square than anywhere else. So Wirree Ford became Wirreeford, and thrived and prospered until it was the busiest cattle market in the south.

To a certain extent, its prosperity threw an air of respectability over it. At first, cattle-owners and farmers from the hills entered the township in the morning and left it before the shadows of night fell. They did their business, and left the Wirree not much better off for their coming, venturing into the shanty for a midday meal only, and drinking sparingly, if at all, of the curious, dark spirits it vended.

Then stores were opened. There were less fearsome comings and goings. Mrs. Mary Ann Hegarty set up a

shanty and proceeded to business with an air of great propriety. Women and children were brought into the township for the cattle sales. Sale days became weekly holidays. They meant the donning of festive ribbands by the women and children, the climbing into high spring-carts and buggies, and driving along the winding track from the hills to the township, where groceries, dress stuffs and household furnishings could be bought, and stowed in the back of the carts for the home journey.

Sale days, however, still ended in gaming and drinking brawls at the shanties, and sometimes in the dropping of a heavy, still body into the Wirree, when the tides would carry it out to sea.

It was the disappearance of a young farmer from the West Hills after a night at the Black Bull that made Donald Cameron decide to take action. He, backed by other farmers and well-to-do hill settlers, made representations to the Port authorities as to the lawless character and conduct of Wirreeford township.

A trooper who rode into it a few days later was pelted with stones, tarred and feathered, and sent back to Port Southern.

Then a building was run-up on the outskirts of the township—a ramshackle house built of overlapping, smooth, pine shingles. It was whitewashed, so that it stood out on the darkest nights to remind roisterers that law and order were in their midst. And as soon as it was finished, John M'Laughlin, a police-sergeant from the Port, took up his residence in it. He mitigated the impression that undue severity would be meted out to evil-doers from the new police head-quarters, by genially brawling with most of his neighbours at McNab's as soon as he arrived, very successfully intimating that he was far too long-sighted, easy-going

and convivial a soul to interfere with the Wirree's little way of doing things.

Donald Cameron was well known in Wirreeford when it began to be a cattle market of importance. So was Davey—Young Davey—as he was called when he began to go regularly to the sales in the years that followed the fires.

Cameron worked all day in the sale-yards with his men. He drove in his own beasts in the morning, threw off his coat for the drafting and, when the sales were over, went out of the township, a stolid, stooping figure, on his heavy bay cob. Although he sometimes made close on a thousand pounds on a day's sales, he went out of the township, as often as not, without spending a penny.

It was said that he was the wealthiest man in the countryside, and as "mean as they make 'em." Yet his disinclination to spend money was made subservient to his sense of justice; and a spirit of matter-of-fact integrity that he carried round with him made the Wirree people regard him with suspicious awe. The iron quality of his will, the hard, straight gaze of his eyes, were difficult things for men with uneasy consciences to encounter. Because he was the first man in the country, it was reckoned a matter of prestige to have the patronage of Donald Cameron of Ayrmuir, whether for a meal, store order, or any job whatever. In jest, half earnest, he was called the Laird of Ayrmuir.

Wirree men said that Thad McNab loathed Donald Cameron "as the devil loathes holy water."

McNab was not the devil in their eyes, nor Donald Cameron holy water, but the saying perhaps suggested to them the composite forces of the two men. Thad, with his twisted mind, his cruel eyes, his treacherous

underhand ways, stood to them for something in the nature of the power of evil. Donald Cameron, with his harsh integrity, his unbending virtue, his parsimony, and sober respectability, stood for something in the nature of abstract good. They had the respect for him that people sometimes have for a standard which has been hung before their eyes, and which they have not been able to live up to. But Thad was their aider and abettor.

Thad, for all his tyrannies, blackmail, petulances, made life easier for them. They stood by him and blessed him, cursing Donald Cameron and his sort, who would have sent them back to the prison cells and torture of the Island. It was not from motives of sheer kindness that McNab stood by them, they knew, but because it paid him. Nevertheless, the thing worked out in the same way. Donald Cameron was more their enemy than Thad. Thad's feud with him amused them as much as a cock fight; their money was on their own bird, and they barracked for him, idly, light-heartedly, scoffing at his enemy.

Almost every man in the Wirree was in McNab's debt. He knew more about their lives and antecedents than was to their soul's comfort. They suspected that more than one of the men who had been taken back to the Island had been put away by McNab, and that those lean, crooked hands of his had fingered Government money—rewards for the capture of escaped convicts. But so long as they were in with Thad McNab, Wirreeford men with pasts that would not bear looking into thought they were all right. Although there were rumours of treacherous dealings on his part, with child-like simplicity, with the faith of the desperate, they trusted McNab, believing that he stood between them and the prisons of Port Arthur. They believed that

if they were "in with Thad," they need not wake, sweating, out of their sleep at the thought of the "cat," or worry if, forgetful of consequences, they gave that tell-tale start at the clank and rattle of irons.

It was pretty well understood that Thad McNab and Sergeant M'Laughlin "worked" together. Thad had been hand-in-glove with him since he came to the Wirree River. The fact sometimes stood unruly spirits in good stead when there was a merry night at the Black Bull. But when there was an inconvenient accident over the cards once or twice, and when there was a hold-up on the Rane road just outside the township, too, it was conceded that M'Laughlin had earned his screw. Thad saw to it that occasionally he made an appearance of doing his duty. If it had been imagined at head-quarters that Sergeant M'Laughlin winked at irregularities in the application of the law at Wirreeford, he might have been moved on, and that would not have suited the landlord of the Black Bull, who would then have had another man to deal with, or have found that another man was dealing with him.

Donald Cameron made no secret of his attitude to McNab. After M'Laughlin had been several months in the township, and there was no outward or visible sight of his having mended its ways, Mr. Cameron made representation to the authorities at Port Southern, and through them to the powers that had their official residence in Melbourne, in respect to Thadeus McNab's position and breaches of the law in Wirreeford. He was clear in his own mind that there was a case against McNab; first, for harbouring convicts escaped from Van Dieman's Land; and secondly, for being the possessor of a still, and for turning it to account in sly grog making. John Ross, Mathew Morrison, and the rest of the hill folk and settlers at the farther end of the

plains, upheld him in this effort to rid the district of McNab; but although an inquiry was made, nothing came of it.

Donald Cameron gained no extra popularity in the Wirree on the first of his counts. Thad's position was, if anything, strengthened by Cameron's hostility. Every man in the township knew that he had to stand by McNab, or McNab would not stand by him; therefore when an officer from the Port came to investigate conditions in Wirreeford, he found nothing to take exception to. He reported that the local police officer was efficient, and that complaints of the hill settlers were due to a personal rancour existing between Donald Cameron and the landlord of the Black Bull.

Thad flourished like a green bay tree after this failure to move him, and forged the weapon of a very serviceable hate against Donald Cameron. He kept it very carefully scabbarded, but occasionally it leapt forth, and its mettle was visible to all and sundry. Ordinarily, Thad kept a locked brain; it was only in rare transports of rage that he revealed anything of its crooked workings. And then those who saw them looked to their own behaviour, and were careful to do nothing that would bring them into its toils.

Probably nobody but Cameron himself thought McNab had swallowed that little business of the inquiry when, a few months later, he was fawning round him, telling him that dinners were to be served at the "Bull" on sale days, and that his patronage would be an esteemed favour. Those who heard him say: "Things has not been as they might have been, always, at the Black Bull, Mr. Cameron—you have had reason to complain in the past—but everything is goin' to be different for the future," could not believe their ears. It was very humbly, with a flattering deference, that McNab had asked "the laird"

to help him to improve the tone of the place by occasionally having a meal in it.

Donald Cameron had been in the habit of taking his meat-pasty, or bread and cheese sandwich to the sale yards in his pocket. He ate his lunch there at midday when most of the men made tracks for the bar opposite. But after a while, he took his meals at the Black Bull, lowering not a whit of his dignity in the doing of it, and treating McNab as curtly in his own establishment as he did anywhere else. When he was down with rheumatics in the early spring, the place had open doors to Davey. He was served like a duke in it.

Young Davey promised to be a chip of the old block, the Wirree said. He worked as insatiably as the old man, and was no more than a roadmender by the look of him. His grey trousers had many a patch on them, and his hat was as weathered a bit of felt as was seen in the yards. He walked with the slouch of the cattlemen—men who have spent most of their days in the saddle.

When he flung off his hat, it was seen he was good-looking enough, with an air of breed about him, a something the Wirree did not quite get. There was a great deal of his mother in the cast of his features, and his eyes were grey and green like hers, but his mouth was Donald Cameron's set in a boy's face. Davey was a shy, awkward fellow and spoke as little as the old man, though it was acknowledged that if his hand was as rarely in his breeches' pockets as his father's, it was because there was nothing in them. It was well known that Donald Cameron worked his son like a convict, and kept him on short commons, giving him neither wages nor pocket-money, so that he blushed when a down-and-out blackguard asked him for the price of a drink and he had not got it to give.

He fed with the old man, this young Davey Cameron, and was never seen in the bars. Few of the men who entered the shanties could say that they had had much to do with Cameron and his son, except John Ross and the Morrison boys, who occasionally dropped into McNab's. But they were of the same sort—hard-working, thrifty, God-fearing, respectable, homely people of the hills, who despised the Wirree River township, its antecedents, descendants, and associations, and did business with it only because business was better done there than anywhere else.

The Schoolmaster and Deirdre had been gone from the hills for over a year when Wirreeford began to make concessions for the sake of the younger generation.

Although cards were shuffled and dice were thrown at the Black Bull, when the rush-lights flickered in the windows after the sales, and the little fires of cowdung—lighted before the doors of the houses to keep away the sandflies and mosquitoes—glowed in the dusk, sending up faint wreaths of blue smoke, Mrs. Mary Ann Hegarty threw open her parlour, and there was dancing in it until the small hours.

The hill people lent the countenance of their presence to days of out-door sports, and to the dancing at Mrs. Hegarty's on Christmas and New Year's day. The Ross boys danced with bright-eyed Wirree girls. Morrison's Kitty and some of the other girls from the hills learnt the reels and jigs that their parents had danced in the country beyond the seas, they were always talking of. The old people danced too. There were nights of wholesome, heart-warming merriment and the singing of old songs.

Only Donald Cameron and his wife held aloof from these festivities. But before long it was observed that Young Davey was going to the monthly dancing with

the Rosses. He rode down from the hills with the boys and Jess. They made the Wirree streets ring as they galloped to Hegarty's, and their laughter streeled out on the wind behind them, as they went home in the early hours of the morning, when even the roisterers at the Black Bull had fallen asleep in uneasy attitudes about its verandahs.

CHAPTER XIX

It was not every day there was dancing at Mrs. Mary Ann's—only on Fridays, after the cattle sales.

And it was not every Friday that Pat Glynn could be got for the music. He wandered all over the country putting the devil into folks' heels. He was in the Port one day, in Wirreeford the next, then on to Rane, or off wandering somewhere over the ranges. Whenever word went round that Pat was coming the couples gathered from every direction. Whether they danced on a wooden floor or on the grass was a matter of little importance. There was always a merry time when Pat Glynn put up anywhere for the night.

He came trotting into Wirreeford on the day of the early November sales, about two years after Deirdre and the Schoolmaster had left the hills. The township was full of dust, cattle, and dogs; boys, yelling, drafting and beating beasts from one yard to another, men watching them, drovers, lean, sun-dried, hawk-eyed men, cattle-buyers, cattle-owners and auctioneers. Horses were hanging on loose reins about the sale-yards, or in rows with drooping heads along the hitching posts at the Black Bull and Mrs. Hegarty's. Two or three heavy family carry-alls were drawn up before the store where the women, with children about them, were shopping, buying lengths of calico, dress stuffs, or groceries and ironmongery, to take home to the hills.

Word that Pat Glynn was at Hegarty's went round like wildfire.

So at Mrs. Mary Ann's it was that all the miscellaneous crowd of the sale-yards foregathered. They danced until the blood boiled under weather-beaten, leathern faces, and the rising sweat left furrows in the dust of the road on them. Matted, lank, sun-bleached hair lay in wet streaky locks on foreheads marked with the line of hats that almost grew on them—the line beyond which the sunburn never travelled. Men, women, boys and girls of all ages, children, grandfathers and grandmothers, Pat danced them all to a state of breathless exhaustion.

As he tucked his fiddle under his chin and raked it with his long bow, his eyes gleamed with mischief and merriment. His arm went backwards and forwards so dexterously, with such agility, that the gay airs he played possessed him as well as everyone who heard them. Old men and women left their benches by the wall and skipped and trundled until the pine floor shook.

The only people who were not dancing were a young mother with a baby in her arms and a teamster too drunk to do more than hang by the door-post. He attempted a few wild and hilarious movements, fell headlong and was dragged feet foremost to the door and thrown out, because he cumbered the floor. The young mother joggled her baby and sang softly in tune to Pat's music, enfolding the assembled company and Pat himself in her beaming smile.

It was incense to Pat's soul to see everybody within earshot moving. The clatter, rhythmic lift, shuffle and thump of heavily-shod feet was as good to his ears as any of the old airs he played.

His arm flying quicker and quicker, sent old and young along with the strain of his music, like corks on a stream. Heads bobbed, feet stamped busily. A catch of laughter flew out. The elderly, stout mother of a family called breathlessly: "Stop it, Pat! Stop it, ye villain!"

But Pat only laughed and his fiddle arm flew faster, till the dancers dropped exhausted against the wall, or hung there gasping with a stitch in their sides. When he had tired them all out, he lifted his bow with a flourish and a shout of laughter.

The two that kept the floor longer than most others were Jess—Ross's Jess, as she was called—and young Davey Cameron. They were reckoned a fine pair of dancers. Pat had great pride in them. When everybody else had left the floor he made the pace faster and faster for them, till they whirled to a finish, watched and cheered by the crowd against the walls. Off-scourings and derelicts of the Wirree, whom Mrs. Hegarty would not have to dance in her parlour, had to amuse themselves by looking in the doorway, or by jigging as best they might out of doors under the star-strewn sky.

It was that night of the November sales, when Pat was at Hegarty's, that the Schoolmaster and Deirdre came back to the Wirree.

They put up at the Black Bull, and it was not until the dance was in full swing that they appeared in Mrs. Hegarty's doorway. Pat was speeding up a reel, his eyes kindling.

"Faith, it's a drop of the craythur you want to waken you up, Mick Ross," he called.

Catching up the air of his tune, he sang gaily, and the company joined in breathlessly at the top of its lungs.

He broke from the song into expostulation and explanation.

"There's the darlin' boy, Buddy Morrison," he cried, tears of laughter running down his withered cheeks. "But he'll break Morrison's daughter's back for her! Let you be gentle with the girl, Buddy. It's a young lady, sir, not a heifer ye have by the horns——"

It was when Davey and Jess were having their last

fling against Pat's music, and he scraping for all he was worth to beat them in their whirling and turning, that Jess saw a tall, dark-eyed girl watching them on the outskirts of the people who had just stopped dancing. She knew her at once, her dark eyes, white skin, the black hair that swept back from her face. It was Deirdre—Deirdre grown very tall and lithe and straight-backed—Deirdre in a dark dress with a necklace of red beads about her neck and a blue ribband round her waist.

Jess knew what the look in her eyes meant as she watched the dancing; she knew and her heart exulted. Deirdre would see that Davey and she had become great friends while she was away. He had not seen the girl in the doorway. He flung Jess backwards and forwards, flushed and excited, spurred on by the music and the test of keeping step, losing no movement of hers, to be even with Pat when he drew his last chords. Jess flew with him. Davey saw no more of her than her sonsy face, surrounded with the fair wisps of curls. Her grey eyes came to him and her lips parted and smiled as her arms went out to him. She stumbled and fell breathlessly at the last; he had to hold her to prevent her falling.

When up at the far end of the room he recovered his breath, his eyes were shining. His laughter rang out, a gay challenge in it:

"How's that for a finish, Pat?"

"Oh, ye're a deevil, Davey!" the old man cried, mopping his forehead.

Jess had put herself before Davey and his view of the door; but he had moved to call to the fiddler.

He saw the group there and stood staring for a moment. The colour ebbed from his face. He recognised the Schoolmaster, though he wore a shade over one eye now, but it was the sight of the dark head, the turn of a

girl's shoulder and back near him that was a shock to Davey. The great moment had come. Deirdre had returned.

She stood with her back to the room, men and women gathered about her and the Schoolmaster. Davey heard her voice ring out. The sound of it thrilled him and left him trembling. It seemed only yesterday that she had gone . . . and yet it was ages—three years. They had written once or twice at first, but somehow the letters had stopped. He had not heard from her for a long time. What could he do? What a lot there would be to tell her. He wanted to show her his new horse, a sturdy red-bay that he had coveted on sight and had induced his father to buy. Would he ever be able to go and speak to her, he wondered, his legs shook so. Would he be able to speak? His throat ached. Did she know that he, Davey, her sweetheart, was there against the wall, so full of love for her that he could not move, that he could only gaze at her. If only she would come to him. If only the whole of Mrs. Mary Ann's room would fall away from them—leave them, just Deirdre and he, together. He did not see Jess, did not realise that she was watching him with a pain in her eyes at the spell-bound wonder and adoration of his.

"It's Deirdre," she said, as if for her the end of the world had come.

"Yes," he breathed.

He could hear Deirdre laughing and chattering with the men and girls who had been to school with her when she and the Schoolmaster lived in the hills. The Schoolmaster had gone out of doors again; but where he had been, a long, black-browed drover of Maitland's, Conal—Fighting Conal—was standing, leaning against the wall and smiling down on her. Beneath the inexplicable

exhilaration, the tingling, thrilling joy which possessed Davey, a slow wrath surged, at the way Conal looked and smiled at Deirdre, and at the way she looked—her eyes leaping up to his—and smiled at Conal. But she was his, his sweetheart, and had promised to marry him, Davey told himself, and the resurgent joy at seeing her flooded him.

“Aren’t you going to dance, Davey?” Jess asked anxiously, when Pat began to fiddle again.

“No,” he said.

“If you’re not going to get-up, can I have this one with Jess?” asked Buddy Morrison with restrained eagerness.

“What?” Davey asked, his eyes on Deirdre.

“If you’re not getting-up, can I have this one with Jess?” repeated Bud Morrison. His sun-scorched face and ruddy hair was responsible for his youthful appearance although he was older by a couple of years than Davey.

He was Jess’s most humble adorer, but his grief was that she would never look at him if Davey was looking at her.

“Oh, yes,” Davey replied.

He watched Jess and Buddy Morrison go out among the dancers. His eyes flew back to where Deirdre had been standing. But she was dancing with Conal.

A lightning tremor of surprise flickered through him; he caught his breath. That anybody but himself would dance with Deirdre had not occurred to him. He made up his mind that he would go to her after the dance. What right had Conal to dance with her? He was caught in a cloud of troubled thought and dismay.

Davey watched them dancing, this tall slender girl with her hair knotted up on the nape of her neck and the long-limbed, bearded man who had come to the sales for Sam Maitland. He could dance. He and Deirdre

were dancing as the people in Wirreeford had never seen folk dancing, and Conal's dark, handsome face was turned down to the girl's. It was not the dance he was thinking of, but her. There was a gleam in his eyes as they covered her; every movement was tender of her.

Jess, in a fury of impatience with her partner, dragged him off the floor. He was heavy and slow on his feet, missed the time, and muddled his steps. In order not to disgrace her own dancing she had to fall back against the wall.

When Deirdre came away from the dancers with her tall partner, Davey went round to where they were standing. Once only he had seen her flash a swift glance round the room, then her eyes had not rested on him at all, but skimmed past him like swallows in flight. He thought that she had not recognised him.

Now that he stood near her his heart throbbed painfully. She laughed and chattered with the people about her. Davey caught a word or two of her greetings to old schoolfellows. Conal bent over her appropriatingly. Deirdre flashed a smile at him as she talked.

Davey stood on the edge of the crowd. A little hurt feeling began to grow in him. Would he never catch her eye? Would she never look his way?

Pat was calling for another dance.

The little crowd shifted and drifted away from Deirdre.

Mick Ross had the temerity to ask her if she would dance with him.

Davey heard him, and he heard Long Conal drawl lazily in reply:

"The man that dances with Deirdre will have to reckon with me to-night."

"Well, I'm not wanting to reckon with you, Conal," Mick replied, laughing, and withdrew to find another partner.

Davey's eyes sparkled.

He walked up to where Deirdre stood in the doorway with the drover.

"Will you dance with me, Deirdre?" he said.

"Why!" she exclaimed blithely, much as he had heard her exclaim to a dozen others, "It's Davey Cameron grown up! I'd never 've known you, Davey, but for the scar on your neck where the calf kicked you. Do you remember the day we were taking him up to Steve's in the spring-cart?"

"Davey and I used to have great times at the school," she explained with a glance for Conal.

"This is Conal, you know, Long Conal, Davey—Fighting Conal—they call him, don't they?" she went on with a little mischievous inflection in her voice.

"Yes, I know," said Davey. "Will you dance with me, Deirdre?"

Few people south of the ranges did not know, or had not heard of Fighting Conal, of Sally, the yellow streak of a cattle dog, half dingo, that he swore by, and of his three parts bred mare, Ginger. "Ginger for pluck," Conal said, and that was why she got her name. Though he had his title to live up to, Conal was a prime favourite on the roads. It was rumoured that he had another name, but nobody ever bothered about it. Conal—Fighting Conal—was a good enough name for any man to go by, it was reckoned.

There was talk under the breath of cattle-duffing sometimes when he was mentioned. But it was always under the breath, for Conal was a man with a fist that could punish any reflections on his character as thoroughly as the fist of a man had ever been known to. But he was a lightsome swaggerer, a reckless, devil-me-care, good-natured sort of bully.

"Then if you know," said Conal coolly, "you'd better

have gone home and to bed, young shaver, before havin' asked Deirdre to dance with you to-night. I don't like any interference with the partners I choose for meself."

It was all said with a lazy good-natured air. Conal was sure of himself. He reviewed with faint amusement this youngster who made claims to privileges that he had reserved to himself for the evening.

"Will you dance with me, Deirdre?" Davey asked again.

His eyes blazed; he trembled with anger.

"Well, I'm——"

Conal straightened and swore amazedly.

But Deirdre's hand caught his sleeve.

"We're missing all this dance," she said quickly. As she turned away on his arm, her eyes swung round to Davey. "Go and find Jess," she said, "you looked such a pretty couple dancing together when I came in."

Her laughter and light-hearted little speech stupefied Davey. He forgot his anger, forgot Conal, forgot the roomful of dancers stampeding merrily, forgot Pat Glynn and his music. He forgot everything, but that Deirdre was laughing at him. Her words tingled in his ears; he had heard her laughter—Deirdre, his sweetheart, was laughing at him—Deirdre who had promised——

He stumbled out of the room.

CHAPTER XX

“ DAVEY ! ”

The Schoolmaster's voice went out with a glad note in it. He turned aside from the men who were talking with him outside Mrs. Hegarty's parlour. His arm stretched to grip the boy's hand.

But Davey swung past. He did not see or hear. He did not even know where he was going. He walked through darkness, surging darkness, though the night was a clear one, stars diamond-bright on the inky-blue screen of the sky. The houses of the Wirree were white in the light. Deep shadows were cast back from their walls as they squatted against the earth.

Davey turned the angle of the house into the stable yard.

Instinct carried him to it, and to the fence where his horse was tethered. There was a fluttered cackle of fowls, a startled yelping of dogs, as he threw on his saddle and turned out of the yard, taking the road to the hills.

The men outside Hegarty's, smoking and swopping yarns with the Schoolmaster, watched him go. Sparks of white fire flew from his horse's hoofs as they beat along the road.

“ Young Davey's riding as though the devil were at his heels,” someone remarked, through teeth that gripped a pipe.

“ Never seen him ride like that before,” Thad McNab said.

Farrel did not speak ; he wondered too what it was

had sent the boy out into the night like that. Half an hour before he had seen him dancing with Jess Ross, and his face had just such a look as his mother's might have had when she was his age, and dancing.

He looked back into the room. Jess was sitting, a very forlorn, dejected little figure on a bench by herself. Deirdre was dancing with Conal.

Instinctively he associated Davey's going with Deirdre.

They had been such good friends when they were children, and he had imagined that they would be so glad to meet each other again.

He followed Deirdre as she danced with Conal. Conal was an old friend of his. He had seen a good deal of him since they left the hills, and few men had the place in the Schoolmaster's regard and affection that Long Conal had. He had been with them on several of their wanderings, and Deirdre and he had always seemed to get on like brother and sister together, he thought. But now he saw the gleam in Conal's eyes as he bent over her, the tenderness in his swarthy face, Deirdre's smile, her swift glances, shy and alluring, her averted head. The way she laughed and moved were a revelation to him.

"So Deirdre's a woman and at woman's tricks," he thought.

She had been a child to him till this night. Conal with his sunburnt, bearded face, his rough hands, his eyes, bright with love and laughter, had made a woman of her, he told himself. And what had she made of him? The Schoolmaster saw his eyes on her neck where the dark curls gathered dewily.

He knew as much as there was to be known of Long Conal, knew that he had flirted and drunk and sworn his way along all the stock routes in the country. He had kissed and ridden away times without number.

But there was something else in his eyes now, something that promised he would never want to ride far, or long, from the sight of Deirdre.

The Schoolmaster was sure of that. For a moment he saw the girl's averted face, the curve of her white neck, the little tendrils of hair clustering moist and jetty about her ears, her scarlet fluttering lips, as Conal might have seen them.

"She's a beautiful woman—Deirdre."

An uneasily-moving voice jerked suddenly behind him with sly, chuckling laughter.

It was Thad McNab who spoke.

He grudged Mrs. Hegarty her gathering of young people and the patronage of Pat Glynn, but then she was able to run the place better than he, and although it was supposed to be her property, none knew better than the two of them that it was his as much as the Black Bull.

McNab came and stood in Mrs. Mary Ann's doorway sometimes when there was dancing, and the joy of several of the dancers was quenched at the mere sight of his shrivelled yellow face and pale eyes.

The Schoolmaster looked down at him. No man could afford to quarrel with McNab.

"How old will she be now?" asked McNab.

"Eighteen," replied the Schoolmaster.

"She's the prettiest girl ever seen down this part of the world," muttered old Salt Watson.

"Conal seems to think so."

It was Johnnie M'Laughlin who laughed.

"And who's Conal to think so? Isn't any girl on the roads good enough for him to play the fool to?" asked McNab, waspishly.

"Best not let him hear you say so, Thad."

McNab shook his shoulders.

"I'm not frightened of Conal. The rest of ye may be."

"Still you wouldn't like that fist of his about you, Thad," Salt Watson murmured, "and Conal isn't what y' might call a respecer of persons when he's roused."

The Schoolmaster went into the dance-room. He crossed it in leisurely fashion and went to Jessie. She was sitting staring before her, a mist of tears dimming her pretty eyes.

He did not go near Deirdre, did not look at her even. But Conal dropped her hand when the Schoolmaster came into the room, and a faint bird-like fear that had fluttered in Deirdre's eyes vanished.

A little later she came to him with a breath that was almost a sob.

"Can't we go now?" she said.

Looking into her eyes he saw the shine of tears in them. He had meant to talk very seriously to her on their way from Mrs. Hegarty's; but now she demanded tenderness and not reproof. She seemed to have stumbled against something she did not understand. She had dropped her armour of gaiety—all her shy, bright glances, smiles, sighs and little airs and graces. She had been playing with these women's weapons and had wearied of them, or perhaps she was surprised at their power, and troubled by it, he thought. There was a hurt expression he had never seen before in her eyes. She looked very young and tired.

He wrapped her up in her shawl, took her by the arm, and they went out into the moonlight together, making their way to the Black Bull, where they were staying until they could find another home in the district.

CHAPTER XXI

IN the Wirree, Farrel was never known as anything but the Schoolmaster. Everybody called him that—even Deirdre when she spoke of him.

They had gone to live in a cottage on the outskirts of the township. The Schoolmaster had taken up his old trade, though it was understood he had been droving with Conal for Maitland the greater part of the time he had been away. Deirdre had wandered with him wherever he went, and it was on her account he was anxious to get back to steadier and more settled ways of life, it was said. Before long two or three of the brown-skinned Wirree children were trotting to the cottage for lessons every day.

The south had heard a great deal of Sam Maitland, head of the well-known firm of Maitland & Co., stock-dealers, of Cooburra, New South Wales.

There had been a bad season in the north-west for a couple of years. Maitland had bought up poor beasts and sent them to fatten in the south. Conal had been driving them through Wirreeford at intervals of two or three months, taking the fattened beasts back on the return journey over the border after he brought down the starvers.

All the week the township slept peacefully in the spring sunshine. When a clear, young moon came up over the plains in the evenings, it drenched them with wan, silver light.

But on Friday morning at dawn, the cattle came

pouring into the town, with a cracking of whips, barking of dogs, yelling and shouting of men and boys. With a rush and a rattling of horns, they charged along between the rows of huddled houses, swinging from one side to the other of the track, wild and fearful-eyed, with lowered heads, long strings of glistening saliva dripping from their mouths. They seemed to be searching for the opportunity to break and head out to the hills again. But ringed with cracking whips, brushing horses, snapping dogs, they were turned into the sale-yards.

The one street of Wirreeford had been cobbled for some distance on either side of the sale-yards because the cattle and horses made a sea of mud about them when the spring rains had soaked into the soft earth. The stores and shanties were full on sale days.

Drovers, rough-haired, hawk-eyed men, with faces leared and seamed with the dust of the roads, hands burnt, and broken with barcoo, slouched along the streets, or stood watching their cattle, yarning in desultory fashion, leaning over the rails of the drafting yards. They smoked, or chewed and spat, in front of the shanties, and at night sprawled over the table at the Black Bull, playing cards or tossing dice.

A mob that had travelled a long way was often yarded the night before the sales. When the selling for the day was over, the beasts that had come down from the hills were driven out along the Rane road, and got under way for the northern markets; but sometimes they were left in the yards, lowing and bellowing all night, while the stockmen who were going to take charge of them spent the evening at the Black Bull, or Mrs. Mary Ann's.

The township was full of the smell of cattle and dogs, and of the muddy, slowly-moving river that had become a waste-butt for the houses.

In the early spring, breezes from the ocean with a tang of salt in them blew right through the houses, and later, when the trees by the river blossomed, and bore masses of golden down, a warm, sweet, musky fragrance was wafted to their very doors. It overlaid the reek of the cattle yards, the fumes of rank spirits and tobacco that came from the shanties. And in the long glimmering twilights when the light faded slowly from the plains and the wall of the hills changed from purple to blue and misty grey, they were caught up into the mysterious darkness of the night—those perfumes of the lightwood and wattle trees in blossom—and rested like a benediction in the air.

From their shabby, whitewashed wattle-and-dab hut on the outskirts of the town the Schoolmaster and Deirdre could watch the twilight dying on the plains and breathe all the fragrance of the trees by the river when they were in bloom. The plains spread in vivid, undulating green before the cottage to the distant line of the hills, and the grass was full of wild flowers, all manner of tiny, shy, and starry, blue, and white, and yellow flowers.

Deirdre had watched Davey bring cattle down from the hills across the plains. She had seen him riding off runaways. Once a heifer had broken and careered over the plains before the cottage. Davey had chased after her at breakneck speed, and, rising in his stirrups, had swept his stock-whip round her, letting it fall on her plushy hide with ripping cracks. He had flogged the beast, driving her with strings of oaths, his dog, a black and tan fury, yelping and snapping at her nozzle, until the blood streamed from it, and with a mutinous bellow she turned back to the mob again.

Deirdre had watched him going home in the evening with his father, or some of Cameron's men, at the heels

of a mob, his eyes going straight out before him. He never looked her way or seemed to see her where she stood, at the gate of the whitewashed cottage within a hundred yards of the river.

She had been chasing Mrs. Mary Ann's geese from the river across the green paddock that lay between the shanty and the Schoolmaster's house, when Davey rode out of the township towards her, one evening. He was driving a score or so of weedy, straggling calves.

Deirdre stood by the roadside and waited for him, her eyes luminous in the dusk. The wind had whipped her hair to the long tendrils it used to hang in when they raced each other along the roads from school.

"Davey!" she called, as he came towards her.

There was appeal in her voice.

But Davey stared at her as though he had not seen her, and passed on.

"You're a rude, horrible boy! And I hate you, hate you, hate you!" she cried passionately after him.

When they met again it was near the sale-yards, when the street was thronged with people from the hills. She had seen his horse hitched to the posts outside McNab's, and so was ready for him when they passed. The path was so narrow that they could not avoid brushing. But Deirdre's chin was well up and her eyes very steady when they met his under his hat brim. Such gloomy, morose eyes they were that she looked into. She almost exclaimed with surprise at them. Her mouth opened to speak. But Davey was as intent on passing as she had been. His face had an ugly, sullen look, something of his father's dourness. After he had passed she stood still and watched him.

He crossed the road and went into the Black Bull.

The Schoolmaster saw him there in the evening. It was not often Farrel was seen in the tap-room of the Black

Bull, though there was always a lighting of eyes, a shifting of seats in anticipation of a lively evening when he appeared. He wondered what Davey Cameron was doing there. His father had been crippled with rheumatism for a couple of weeks and Davey had charge of his business. Farrel wondered if he had begun to swagger, to give himself airs on the strength of it.

He seemed on good terms with McNab and most of the men in the bar, but his acknowledgment of Dan's greeting was off-hand and he went soon after Farrel came in.

The Schoolmaster's eyes met McNab's; but McNab's eyes never met any man's for very long. Perhaps he was afraid of the inner man a stranger might get glimpse of, afraid to let any one else see in his eyes the secrets of that sly, spying soul of his.

Now that Farrel had only one eye, McNab feared him less, although when the concentrated light of the Schoolmaster's spirit poured from it in a single beam, he fidgeted, showed craven and was glad to escape.

No one had the knack that Dan Farrel had of showing McNab to the Wirree for what he was. The Schoolmaster could string McNab up before the eyes of the men in the bar on the thread of one of his whimsical humours and show him dangling, all his crooked limbs writhing, his twisted face simmering with wrath. He could pin McNab with a few, lightly-flung words and make a butt of him, where he stood before his rows of short-necked, black and muddled bottles. He would have him quivering with wrath, impotent against that bitter, blithe wit and the laughter it raised. He laughed too—McNab. He was wise, as cunning as a dingo. Though his eyes were baleful, and his hands shook as he poured the raw spirits from his bottle into a mug beside him, he laughed.

"It's a mad game y're on with McNab," Salt Watson, one of the oldest of the Wirreeford men, said to the

Schoolmaster one evening on his way home. "Give it up, Dan! It's good enough to make the boys laugh, but you've only to look at Thad's face when he smiles to know what he is promising himself of it all."

The Schoolmaster had watched McNab's face when he smiled. He had learnt all he wanted to. He knew what Salt meant.

For awhile he dropped out of the circle round Thad's bar. When he made one of it, his laughter was less frequent, and he missed McNab when his lightly-flung arrows of wit whistled in the assembly. His spirits had suffered a depression. Some of the men thought the trouble with his eyes was on his mind. He avoided encounters with McNab, though none of them had any idea he was afraid of Thad. His one eye was more than a match for Thad's two any day, they knew.

There was no open quarrel between them. The Schoolmaster's duelling with McNab had never been more than a laughing matter, a pricking, rapier fashion, in the intervals of card-playing and drinks. It had an air of good-fellowship. His humour had a quality of amiability, though nobody was deceived by it, least of all Thad himself. There was always contempt and an underlying bitterness in it.

CHAPTER XXII

"WHAT'S the matter with Davey?" Farrel asked his daughter a few days later. "I've asked him to come up here and have tea with us, but he won't come. He'll barely speak to me when we meet, gets out of my way if he sees me coming."

Deirdre was kneeling by the hearth waiting for the kettle to boil. Their table was spread with cups and saucers and a little pile of toast smoked beside the teapot. She said nothing, only bent her head lower to avoid his glance.

"Have you got anything to do with it?" he asked.

The firelight played on her face. For a moment she thought she would tell him of the meeting under the trees and the promises she and Davey had made to each other when they said good-bye. But there was so much to tell, and he would be hurt that she had not told him about it long ago. They never had any secrets. She had shared all her thoughts with Dan. At first, that she and Davey were sweethearts, had just been something to smile about and gossip over with herself.

The Schoolmaster had wondered while they were away why she was always restless and wanting to get back to the hills. And now there was shame and grief in her heart—a smarting sense of anger and disappointment that had come of seeing Davey dancing with Jess, and of hearing what people were saying about them. It was all fixed up between Ross's Jess and Davey Cameron, someone had told her, and remarked what a

fine couple they would make, and how satisfied their parents were about it—even Donald Cameron, who was not an easy man to please. She could not explain all that.

Dan read in her face something of what was in her mind. He took her hand and looked into her face. It was quivering and downcast.

"Then you have had something to do with it, Deirdre," he said.

"No."

Her voice broke.

"It was the night of the dance, at Mrs. Mary Ann's the night we came, I remember," he said; "Conal was there, and Davey went away angry."

"I've tried to speak to him a dozen times, since," she cried.

"Well, I can't quite make it out," the Schoolmaster said, after a few moments, "but they tell me in the town that since his father's been ill and Davey's had charge of things, he's been drinking a good deal and playing the fool at McNab's generally. We've got to try and get him out of that, if it's only for his mother's sake, Deirdre. We owe her a bigger debt, you and I—you because you love me—than we can ever repay."

"She owes you something, too," the girl said quickly, "that night of the fires if you hadn't tried to prevent it——"

She knew that he was displeased.

"You mustn't say that again," he said.

"Oh, I hate her! I hate her!" Deirdre cried, passionately.

"What do you mean?"

The Schoolmaster's voice was very quiet.

Deirdre clung to him sobbing.

"I didn't mean that I hate her really," she said. "I

like her too. But she's the only one who has ever come between you and me, Dan, and I can't bear it."

He drew her to his knees and looked down gravely into her face. Her body was stiff against his; it shuddered and a storm of tears shook her. Tragic dark eyes were lifted to his when her weeping had spent itself.

"When she came and you looked at her, my heart died," she said. "Don't you remember when we used to gather the wild flowers to put on the table at school, you used to say we could never find a flower that was like her eyes. When we made a Mrs. Cameron bouquet, we used to put in it white honey-flowers and the pink giraffe orchids that grow on a long stem, for the colour of her cheeks, scarlet-runners for her mouth, and fly-catchers for her hair. Don't you remember? At first we couldn't find anything for her hair, but then I found the climbing fly-catchers with the little pink buds on the end of them. The down on the leaves, all brownly gold and glistening in the sun, was a little bit like her hair, wasn't it, Dan?"

"Yes," he said, his mind going back to all their gay gatherings of wild flowers for Mrs. Cameron. It awed and surprised him that she should even then have discovered what his most secret heart was scarcely aware of.

"It was the little blue flowers, don't you remember, we put in for her eyes?" Deirdre went on. "Though you said that they weren't a bit like her eyes. 'Dew on the grass' is what some would call her eyes, but it is a poor colour, that—dew on the grass—no colour at all,' you said. 'Grass with the dew on it, or dew with a scrap of heaven, or the twilight shining in it, would have been better. That's what she has, Deirdre,' you used to say; 'eyes with the twilight in them—twilight eyes—you can see her thoughts gathering in them, brooding and dark, or glimmering like the light of the

day, dying.' Do you remember saying all that to me? I do; because I've said it over to myself so often."

He understood the apprehensive, shy and shamed confession of her eyes.

"Do you mean," he asked, "that Deirdre thinks anybody could be to me what she is?"

Deirdre nodded, her contrite gaze melting into his.

"That one," his head turned in the direction of the hills, "is like the Mother of God to me. She was very good to me when I was a desperate man, long ago."

Deirdre gazed at him, her lips quivering.

"That's why you must always love her—Mrs. Cameron—my darling black head," he said.

"Sing it to me," Deirdre cried, thirsting for the tenderness of the old song.

He gathered her up in his arms and crooned in the Gaelic as he used to when she was a baby:

"Put your black head, darling, darling, darling.
Your darling black head my heart above.
O mouth of honey, with thyme for fragrance,
Who, with heart in breast, could deny you love?"

Deirdre, pressing to him, tasted the satisfaction that all young creatures have in being close to those they love. His arms were warm and tender. An invasion of peace drove the sorrowful ache from her heart.

"My own mother," she asked suddenly. "Was she like Mrs. Cameron?"

"No."

There was the mingling of grief and troubled thinking in his face that she had always seen there when he spoke of her mother.

"She had a little brown bird, an English bird that sang in a cage," he said. "She was like that; but she

never sang herself. She was one of those people life has broken, Deirdre."

"You married her . . . and looked after her, Dan!"

His head dropped; he avoided her eyes.

"Then you came . . . and she died," he said.

"Such a sorrowful mite you were!" he went on.

"Such a lonely baby, wailing night and day, that there was only one name to give you, Deirdre—Deirdre of the griefs."

His eyes were lifted to hers. The black shield covered one of them; the other was shining with his tenderness for her, the strength of the tide behind it.

"It was a sorrowful name to give you, darling, you that have been the sunshine, and have banished the sorrows of my life," he cried. "May they never come any more or grief touch us again!"

CHAPTER XXIII

STRANGE tales were being told of Cameron's son in Wirreeford.

Donald Cameron had been laid up, crippled with rheumatism since the early spring, and Davey had been managing for him. For the first time in his life the boy found himself with responsibility, authority and money in his hands. The old man required a strict account of his movements and operations, allowing him only a few shillings to pay for his meals and nothing over for the couple of drinks that cemented a deal in the township.

McNab had got hold of Young Davey. How it was not exactly known.

"Let the old man sew up his money-bags, Young Davey'll open them for him," sale-yard loafers began to say.

Davey swaggered. He was cock of the walk at McNab's. Conal had gone to New South Wales again, and now there was not a man spent more, nor was as free with the dice as Davey.

The Schoolmaster heard McNab talking to Davey in the parlour behind the bar one evening, filling the boy with a flattery that went to his head faster than the crude spirits he plied him with.

"The only son of the richest man in these parts—be a bit of a millionaire y'self, Davey—when y're too old to enjoy the money—have a good time with it," McNab said. "Your father's a great man—a great man, Davey

—a bit near, that's all—don't understand that a high-spirited youngster like you'se got to have a bit of gilt about him! Makes you look ridiculous, that's what it does, havin' no more money about you than a teamster, or a bloomin' rouseabout."

"Here you . . . you hold your tongue about the old man, McNab," Davey struggled to say. "You . . . you give me the money. It'll be all right when I come into the property. I want to go'n have a game with the boys now."

McNab sniggered.

"Oh well—you're a lad, Davey," he said. "As good a man with cattle as your father, and you know better than he does how to make yourself popular. We used to say you was as mean as him once—a chip of the old block."

Davey started to his feet. He stood by the table, swaying a little as he hung to it.

"You . . . you be careful, McNab, or I'll smash your damned head," he said.

It was only when they were very fuddled that men spoke to him like this. McNab giggled.

Farrel heard the boy's voice. It came to him, thick and uncertain, through the thin walls. The door of McNab's parlour was ajar. He caught a glimpse of Davey's sullen, flushed face, his eyes, stupid and dull, with the glow of drink in them.

He pushed open the door and went into the room.

"Hullo, Davey," he said, "I was looking for you."

Davey stared at him uncertainly.

"You mayn't know, Mr. Farrel," McNab said, an evil light in his yellow eyes, "but Davey, here, is doing an important bit of business with me and you're intrudin'."

The Schoolmaster glanced at him.

"Intruding, am I?" he replied coolly. "Well, it seems to me, it's just about time."

"What do you mean? What the hell do you mean?"

"School's out, Mr. Farrel," Davey crowed, lurching back on his heels. "You hurry up and give me the money, McNab."

McNab put a couple of sovereigns into his hand.

"Come and have a drink, Mr. Farrel," Davey cried boisterously. "There's a couple of chaps in the bar . . . waiting for me . . . and I'll play you poker, bob rises. Not a dime more."

He staggered across the room and threw open the door into the tap-room. McNab followed him, turning back at the doorway to shoot a glance of triumph at the Schoolmaster.

Davey's appearance in the bar was hailed with a shout. Dan heard the rattling of bottles and glasses, the shouts of laughter, blaring of oaths and stamping of heavy feet that followed the boy's call for drinks all round.

Fragments of a song, bawled jocosely, came to the Schoolmaster's ears as he tramped down the road to the cottage, on the edge of the township.

He brooded over the change in Davey, asking himself how he came to be kicking over the traces; why he was going to the dogs with the ne'er-do-wells of McNab's, what Donald Cameron would say to it if he knew; how he could fail to know; what his mother was feeling and thinking about it. She would know, of that he was certain. Not much escaped those clear, still eyes of hers.

In the morning when he saw the boy again, he tried to speak to him; but Davey swung past, dragging his hat over his face, shamefacedly.

The Schoolmaster got into the habit of watching him, trying to see his face. Sometimes it surprised him. He had seen Davey thrashing a steer until the blood poured from its tawny hide. He had seen him swinging along the roads on sale days after the midday meal, reckless and laughing, his head thrown back, a couple of McNab's men at his heels. He had heard him singing drunkenly on his way home to the hills in the evenings.

He went after him one evening, when Johnson, Cameron's head stockman, had gone on early, and Davey was going home alone.

"Look here, Davey," he said, riding beside him, "what's this game you're on? You'll have to drop it."

Davey laughed.

"You're like the rest of them," he said bitterly. "Think a fellow never grows up! I've been treated like a kid too long. The old man's been making me the laughing stock of the country . . . and he's got to understand I'm a man . . . and I've got to be treated like one."

"You needn't go drinking and chucking money about at McNab's to be that——"

Davey's eyes veered on him.

"Conal does it," he said. "And you all think no end of him."

"Oh, Conal! What has he got to do with it?" The Schoolmaster hesitated. "Conal does it . . . but then he's a roadster. It comes natural to him. It doesn't to you. You're Cameron's son and——"

"Cameron's son!" Davey scoffed. "Much good that does me!"

"What's your father going to say when he hears about this business at the Black Bull," the Schoolmaster asked.

"Say? Oh, he'll cut up at first. He's got to understand though, I've got to go my own way—have some money to call my own. He won't know more than's good for him though. That's arranged between McNab and me."

"You don't mean to say you've got into any—arrangement with McNab?" the Schoolmaster asked.

"Oh, you needn't look like that about it," Davey replied. "It's a harmless one. He's been decent. I'm not fool enough to give McNab any real handle against me."

"You're a darned fool, Davey," the Schoolmaster said, his voice ripping the silence with startled energy. "McNab and his crew 'll have you in a hole before you know where you are."

Davey flicked the reins across his mare's neck. She leapt forward along the track.

There was not a man in Wirreeford who did not think he knew what Thad was driving at, that he was working for a shot at Donald Cameron through Young Davey. Only he did not see it, the calf, they said. They laughed and followed the course of Thad's snaring, with winks, chuckles of amusement, and sly jokes at Young Davey's expense, although they drank with him, flattered and applauded him, playing up to the part McNab had set them.

The Schoolmaster tried again to warn the boy. This time, Davey was inclined to listen to him.

"What can McNab do to me?" he asked. "I'm not a lag, or a lag's son."

"No," the Schoolmaster said, a little bitterly. "But I've been watching McNab—seeing the way he works. He's got a genius for the underhand job. There's not much he couldn't do if he set his mind to it. He's set his mind to something now I can see that . . . and

you're in the way of it. I don't know exactly what it is. You know he doesn't love your father. Perhaps it's that. He's never forgiven him for trying to get him cleared out. He's using you somehow, Davey."

"I believe you're right, Mr. Farrel," Davey said slowly, after a while. "I've been a fool!" He swore uneasily. "Think I've been mad lately. I wanted people to reckon I wasn't . . . just Cameron's son, and 'mean as they make 'em!' I'm two parts wrong and one part right. The right part is, I've got to be independent. I've got to have money of my own. It was what you said the other night set me thinking. I'm going to keep out of McNab's way."

"McNab never shows his hand when he means to win, Davey," there was a whimsical inflection in the Schoolmaster's voice. "You can only beat him at his own game if you don't let him see your cards either."

"Eh?" the boy looked at him. "You mean don't drop him at once . . . let him down slowly."

"Yes. He's got his knife into me, too, you know, though he hasn't shown it quite clearly yet. He's good at the waiting game. It'll be a bit interesting to see how he marks us both off—if we don't mark him off, that is. I'm going to get out of his way as soon as I can. I'm giving up the teaching here. Deirdre and I are going up to Steve's for a while, and then I hope we'll shake the dust of the Wirree off our feet."

They were parting when the Schoolmaster said:

"Hear Pat and Tom Kearney have cleared out to the new rush? Eaglehawk, isn't it? They brought in a mob for Conal—Maitland's cattle—from the North-west, poor as mice. They said Conal was on the roads and will be in presently to take them up to the hills. Maitland's got a couple of fattening paddocks beyond Steve's."

Two days later, on sale day, this same scraggy mob of northern bullocks was still in the largest pen of the Wirreeford yards. Davey heard them bellowing mournfully.

"Conal's been expected the last couple of days to take charge of them," somebody told him. "But he's not come yet, and the Schoolmaster's beating the town for a man to drive 'em to the hills for him. The boys 've all cleared out to the rush. Dan's goin' to take them himself in the morning."

CHAPTER XXIV

MRS. CAMERON was not seen in Wirreeford during those months of her husband's illness. Cameron drove into the township unexpectedly one day when the sales were in progress and she was with him. He went to the yards and she turned the horse, a sturdy daughter of old Lassie, back along the road and halted her outside the Schoolmaster's cottage.

Deirdre went out to meet her.

"I only heard you were back a few days ago, Deirdre," Mrs. Cameron said.

"Didn't Davey tell you?" Deirdre asked.

"No," his mother replied.

They went indoors and Mrs. Cameron sat with her back to the window in the Schoolmaster's wicker chair. Deirdre noticed that she looked older and wearier than when she had last seen her.

"They tell me you're to marry Conal, the drover, dear," Mrs. Cameron said.

"It's not true!" Deirdre gasped, turning away from her. "Who told you?"

"Mrs. Ross, it was," Mrs. Cameron replied. "She was over the other day . . . she and Jess. She said the boys had heard at the sales."

"They tell me," Deirdre's eyes met Mrs. Cameron's, and her voice ran as quietly as hers, "that Davey's to marry Jess Ross."

"Oh," Mrs. Cameron exclaimed, distressfully, "I don't know! They say so, but Davey——"

Her face worked pitifully.

"He's so strange. I don't understand him at all, Deirdre. He's so changed. I can't help him . . . can't do anything for him. He seems to have become a man quite suddenly, and——"

She put her hands over her eyes and began to cry.

Deirdre bent over her.

"Don't ! Don't cry, Mrs. Cameron, dear," she whispered, kissing her.

"It's so foolish," Mary Cameron said tremulously, as if asking forbearance, "but my heart's just breaking to see Davey like he is ! I have managed to keep his father from knowing, so far, but I'm afraid—I daren't think what will happen when he knows."

Deirdre said nothing, but her eyes were full.

Mrs. Cameron stretched a hand out to her.

"Oh, dear," she said, "they say it is Jess, Davey's going to marry, but I can't think it's anybody but you he cares about. When first you went away we used to talk about you ; Davey used to say : ' She's a Pelling, I do believe, mother '—because of the fairy-tale I used to tell him. He made me tell it over and over again after you'd gone away. It was about Penelop, the tylwyth teg, who married the farmer's boy. Do you remember, Deirdre ? I'm sure I told it to you, too, in the old days."

"Yes," Deirdre cried breathlessly, "and ever afterwards their descendants were called Pellings, the children of Penelop, and it was said, if they had dark hair and bright eyes, there was fairy blood in their veins."

Mrs. Cameron smiled.

"Yes," she said, "fancy you remembering it after all this long time, dear. Once, soon after you'd gone away, Davey said to me, ' I wonder if Deirdre married me, mother, would she melt away if I touched her with a piece of iron.' He sat thinking and smiling a long

time, Deirdre, and I felt so happy about you both. . . . Then you came back . . . and it was all different."

"I've been thinking perhaps it was Conal has come between you." The eyes of Davey's mother were very wistful. "But if you're not going to marry Conal, perhaps you can be good friends with Davey again, Deirdre. He would do anything in the world for you once. The other night when he came home—he had been at McNab's until late and the drink was strong on him—I couldn't let him into the house for fear of his father waking. He slept in the barn and I sat near him . . . I was afraid he might light a match and drop it in the hay . . . and he talked in his sleep—sobbing and crying—and it was your name he was saying, over and over again to himself, as though his heart was breaking over it, 'Deirdre! Deirdre!'"

"And there's some affair with McNab troubling him," Mrs. Cameron went on. "I don't know what it is. Oh, I don't know what he's been doing to get mixed up with McNab in anything—I know he can mean Davey no good whatever. He has sworn to have vengeance on his father for long enough. They say you're the most beautiful woman in the country, Deirdre. If only you'd help me to keep Davey away from McNab's! You could! He'd do anything for you in the old days. What is it has come between you?"

Mrs. Cameron's eyes were very like Davey's had been when he kissed her under the trees, Deirdre thought.

She put her hand in Mrs. Cameron's.

A shadow darkened the window, breaking the blank of the sunlight beyond it. The Schoolmaster came in at the door that overlooked the road.

An exclamation drew his gaze to the far end of the room.

Mrs. Cameron held out her hand to him.

She had not seen him since the night of the fires. Deirdre went to her little lean-to of a kitchen and busied herself making tea.

When she returned, Mrs. Cameron was sitting as she had left her, on the wicker chair with her back to the light; but there was an added pain in her eyes: her hands lay limp in her lap.

Deirdre had a tray with tea and the cups on it. She set it down on the table in the middle of the room, and they gathered their chairs about it.

"What a nice home you've got," Mrs. Cameron said, smiling at the Schoolmaster. "Deirdre has turned out a wonderful housekeeper after all."

The Schoolmaster laughed.

"She was always more eager to be 'possuming and chasing calves with Davey than to be learning to cook and sew, wasn't she?" he said.

"But after a while she made butter as well as I could." Mrs. Cameron smiled. "And as for spinning, Deirdre could take my old wheel and twist up a yarn for me in no time. Will you let her come soon to stay with me for a while?"

"Yes."

The Schoolmaster's eyes dwelt on the girl for a moment.

"There are not enough children coming for schooling. We won't be here for much longer," he said. "We'll be going up to Steve's soon."

"Going up to Steve's?" Deirdre asked. "When?"

The Schoolmaster did not answer at once.

"When Conal gets back. I want to see him first," he said. "We'll just be staying a few weeks with Steve for a holiday and then be leaving the district again."

Mrs. Cameron sat talking to them of the every-day

affairs of her life, a little longer. Then she got up to go.

"Is it true what they say—that he will lose his sight?" she asked Deirdre when they were outside.

Deirdre nodded. She could scarcely speak of the time when the light of the world would be blotted out for ever from Dan.

"We saw a doctor in Rane. He said so," she replied.

Mrs. Cameron's exclamation was in the soft tongue of the spinning song she sang when she sat with her wheel in the garden. Deirdre did not know the words, but she understood their distress and the little gesture that went with them.

CHAPTER XXV

DONALD CAMERON was made of the stuff that gives confidence and appreciation grudgingly. He was obsessed by the idea that no one could do anything as well as he could. He could only satisfy his own reckless desire to be up and doing by girding at all that was being done for him. If Davey had been less efficient a stop-gap it would have pleased him better. He would have liked to see mistakes made which would assure him that no one but himself could run Ayrmuir as it ought to be run. But Davey had done very well in his place. He had brought off one bargain with a smartness that his father vaguely resented, and Davey was chockful of boyish pride over.

There had been chafings and crossings of will, two or three times. Mary Cameron trembled when she heard them. Anxious fears fluttered and filled her with foreboding every time her husband's irritability at his chained helplessness and crippling pain was directed at Davey. The boy's short answers with an underlying contempt in them fanned his father's smouldering wrath.

"Davey, dear," she had said once, after there had been high words between them, "try and be a little more patient with your father. It's hard on him having to sit in a chair like this after the active life he's led. He's fretting his heart out to be up and doing things, and seeing them done the way he likes."

"There's no pleasing him, mother," Davey said, shaking her arms from him.

She knew he was right, but Davey was almost as sullen and surly as his father these days. Donald Cameron kept him going all day. The boy was dog-weary when he came into the house at nightfall; then there were entries to make and book-keeping to do, accounts of sales and movements of stock to render, and nothing but carping and fault-finding for his pains.

At one time, in the evenings he used to take out his books and read intently for hours, sprawling over the table, till the candle flickered down and his mother said softly: "Won't you go to bed now, dear?" knowing that late hours were never an excuse, in Donald Cameron's eyes, for failing to be out after the cows before the sun was up. But now he lay in his chair, his long legs stretched out before him, after he had given his father an account of the day's work, and got from him directions for the next; and there was a sullen, brooding look on his face, an expression in his eyes that it hurt her to see.

Davey's face had changed so within the last few months. It was a revelation to her. There was a firmness of line about his chin and upper lip that caused her to glance from him to his father. Little of the boy was left in Davey now, she realised. What there was lay in his eyes and about his mouth. It was as if the child in him were dying hard. Something had hurt him bitterly, she surmised, and she wondered whether it was bitter thinking, hard riding, or the life he was leading with strange, rough men that had brought those creases about his nose, given his face its dour manliness.

This man-Davey was a stranger to her. Her heart yearned over him, as though her baby had been snatched from her arms. She wanted to know him, to understand his ways of thinking. But he had a new and strange manner with her. His mind was shut. He kissed her

in a perfunctory fashion, and when she put her arms round him, he stiffened under them. In sympathetic sensitive fashion she knew that he was guarding the kingdom of himself against her. She had some subtle warning that he was afraid of her love, of her tenderness, which, with its fine edge, might prize open the inner shell of his being and discover the trouble and tremulous fury of emotion which lay hidden within.

She was afraid of offending him, afraid of approaching him with her affection and sympathy, afraid not to respect the reserve that he had put between them. Yet her anxiety tormenting her, one day she said :

"Tell me what is troubling you, Davey? Tell me. It is breaking my heart to see you like this."

"There's nothing to tell, mother," he replied sharply.

For a long time he had not been coming home till late. The silence of the long evenings when she sat and sewed by the fire and Donald Cameron glowered into it, smoking, had been unbroken. Sometimes he had asked where Davey was. Then she stilled the tremors in her voice to say quietly that she thought he was with the Rosses or at Mrs. Hegarty's for the dancing

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN Davey came in from the Wirree, the night after Mrs. Cameron had been to see Deirdre and the Schoolmaster, Donald Cameron was standing before the fire.

He had said nothing all the way of the long drive from Wirreeford; but his wife, by the set of his face, knew that something unusual had happened. He stood before the fireplace waiting for Davey to come home, listening for the sound of his horse's feet, the yelping of the dogs in the yard that would announce his arrival.

Before they had left the sale-yards, as he was sitting in the high buggy before they drove off, he had sent her back to look for Davey and tell him to come home as soon as the sales were over. Davey, a lean, lithe figure, on the edge of a group of stockmen, had recognised the urgency in her voice, the appeal of her eyes, as she gave him the message.

"We were just fixing-up to have a game of poker to-night, Mrs. Cameron," Mick Ross had said.

She sought Davey's eyes. The shadow of his hat was over them. He stood a moment flicking his leggings with the lash of the long whip curled on his arm.

"Right, mother! I'll come along, presently," he said.

She went back to her husband, her heart soothed.

But his face all the way home had filled her with fear.

"Has anything happened to upset you, Donald," she asked.

"Aye, matter enough," he replied.

"What is it?" she ventured.

"You'll hear soon."

He lapsed into silence again.

She knew that there was trouble ahead for Davey. What it was she could only imagine; every fibre of her being ached to know. She hurried Jenny on with the dinner so that his father's inner man would be warmed and comforted before Davey arrived.

He was an hour or two later than they were.

When he came into the kitchen she went up to him and put her arms round him.

"Whatever you do, don't cross your father, Davey dear," she said. "He's in a queer temper to-night."

Davey looked at her stupidly. He threw off his hat and brushed his hand across his forehead.

"Right, mother," he said slowly.

His voice was thick. She smelt the whisky on his breath as he turned into the next room.

Hurrying backwards and forwards from the fire to the table, lifting the dinner she had kept warm for him by the fire, she did not hear the first words of the storm that was brewing in the inner room. Lifting the tray she carried it in, but on the threshold she stood still, her heart cold at the sight of her husband and son.

They were facing each other, all the antagonism that had been latent for months, between them, ablaze in their eyes, betrayed by every line of their passion-white faces. She put her tray on the table.

Donald Cameron had a packet of papers in his hand. The torn envelope he had taken them from lay on the floor.

"Look at them . . . look at them!" he shouted.

"Perhaps you can tell me the meaning of them."

David took the papers. He pushed back a chair, staring at them.

"Curse McNab!" he muttered. "He promised me——"

"Curb your tongue in this house!" Donald Cameron took a step forward. "Have you anything to say to these bills? McNab says you've had credit for a couple of hundred pounds."

Davey's head cleared. The sight of his father's face, livid with rage, raised a demon in him.

"Yes," he said, "there's a couple of drinks I had to-day not charged for."

"You insolent young blackguard!" Donald Cameron cried, careless of words in his anger. "Is this the sort of son I've got—goes robbing me behind my back, drinking with pothouse boys, lags and thieves? I thought you could be trusted to take charge of my interests while I was ill."

"Stop that!" Davey's nostrils quivered ominously.

"Thought you could play the young lord . . . and McNab comes telling me——"

"I'll wring McNab's neck!"

"Aye, you will," said the old man, bitterly. "You've let him wring you properly. McNab's got no reason to love me and you know it . . . but he did the square thing this time—if he never did it in his life before, telling me I was being robbed by my own son."

"I'd advise you, father, not to talk that way," Davey's temper was rising. "I wanted money; you wouldn't have given it to me if I'd asked for it. I had to get it. McNab lent it to me. He said I could pay him by and by, and that it was good enough—being Cameron's son—to borrow money on. He said you'd never see these receipts I gave him."

"Well, you'll borrow no more," Donald Cameron breathed. "Johnson can take charge of things till I'm about again. And before you make an arrangement of

this kind again you'll perhaps wait till I'm dead and buried. I'll have it posted in the Wirree that no one is to serve you with drink unless you pay for it."

"If you do that——" Davey began.

"What I regret is that I didn't give Johnson charge of things from the first," the old man continued. "But I set my own son before him. You've shown y' weren't fit for the trust—snaring me on a level with gaol birds. . . ."

Davey's voice trembled with passion.

"I haven't snared you!" he cried, "I haven't taken what wasn't my own. Isn't what's yours, mine? Haven't you always said so? Isn't that what you've said when I've asked for wages and you've said: 'No!' Haven't you said that it will be all mine some day—this place and all the money you've made? Who else have you got to give it to? I've only been doing with the money what you ought to have done. I've spent some of it so as not to have us shamed in the country."

"Oh, that's it, is it?" Donald Cameron's grey eyes gleamed beneath their shaggy brows. "The son's to make ducks and drakes of the fortune the father earns by the sweat of his brow. Well, I'll tell you this much, Davey, you'll not get a penny of my money to throw to the winds. If you were a good son, a hardworking, industrious lad, y' might be sure of it, but if you were fifty times flesh of my flesh, you'd not get a penny to go to the devil with."

"Donald! Donald!" Mary Cameron laid a hand on her husband's coat. "Don't speak to the boy like that," she cried. "You know he's a good lad, that he's worked hard for years."

He pushed her away.

"Be silent!" he said harshly. "You've held y're tongue, though you must have known what's been going on—that he's got into these brawling, roistering ways."

McNab told me about them—said that I'd be blaming him when I found out, if he didn't tell me himself. You've screened and hidden the boy."

"Leave mother out of it," Davey said.

"Davey!" she besought him.

"It's all right, mother," he turned from her, impatiently.

"We've got to have this out now and be done with it. I'm not going on as I have done. This is what I've got to say."

He eyed Donald Cameron squarely.

"Since I left school four years ago, I've worked on this place—worked harder than two men. And what have I got for it—wages? No. Abuse? Stacks of it! And you're making money, hand over fist."

The contempt in his eyes deepened.

"I know what your bank says. I know what the countryside says about Donald Cameron's money. You're the richest man this side of the ranges. . .

"But how do we live? You go about in old clothes as if you hadn't a penny to bless yourself with; and I might be anybody's rouseabout for the look of me. Never a penny leaks out of your pockets if you can help it. There's none in them to leak out of mine. Don't you know what people are saying about us? Haven't you heard anybody say: 'There go Cameron and his son! Old Cameron is as mean as they make 'em, and Young Davey's a chip of the old block!' It was hearing that got me down. What's the good of your money to you? What's the good of it to mother? What's the good of it to me? Because you worked hard for it in the beginning, is that any reason why you should hang on to it, when you've got it—be afraid to spend it?

"I might just as well be dead as working always with nothing else in the world to think of but work—always under your thumb, screwed down—not allowed to have

a mind of my own. I'd rather get a job on the roads and be free, and have a few shillings in my pocket."

Donald Cameron's face was set.

"I've said my say," he said.

"And I've said my say," cried Davey.

"Johnson'll have charge from to-morrow an' you'll work under him."

"You'll give me wages—pay me the same as the rest of the men?" Davey asked, his eyes bright with anger.

"No."

Cameron hesitated. Something of the justice of the boy's point of view reached him. But there was more involved than a mere recognition of justice. It meant the breaking of a will. And it was foreign to his mind to yield; his obstinacy was the habit of a lifetime.

"You're my son—not a hired labourer on the place," he said. "I've fed and clothed you all your days. You'll have food and clothes—and what else I like to give you."

"And how much will that be?"

Davey eyed him narrowly.

"It won't wear a hole in y'r trousers pockets." Donald Cameron permitted himself the grim humour, believing that he had won the day. "And it won't encourage you to be dicing and drinking at McNab's."

His mother, more sensitive to Davey's state of mind, broke in.

"Oh," she cried, "have no more of this talking now! Sit down and eat your supper, Davey. It'll all be cold."

"Stick to your money!" Davey yelled. "I won't be fed and clothed by you any longer. I'll earn my own living somewhere else." He strode out of the room. His mother heard him go across the flagged floor of the kitchen.

"Go out after him, Donald. Call him back," she urged.

"No," said Cameron slowly.

Davey's defiance was a shock to him. He had ruled his little world autocratically. His will had been law. He had not believed that Davey would dare to resist it.

"If he goes of his own will—let him come back of it," he said.

"Oh, go after him, Donald," she cried. "You've driven him to it, you, with your harshness."

She ran to the door; but already the beat of hoofs was flying up from the misty depths of the trees.

"Davey! Davey! Davey!" she called.

She ran down the track calling him.

But Davey was beyond her voice, or the sound of his horse's hoofs and the hot blood in his ears dulled the echo of his name that floated down to him.

When Mary went indoors again Donald Cameron was sitting in his chair, the fire had gone out of his eyes, leaving him dull and vacant.

"You've been harsh with him, Donald," she said. "It's all true what he says. You have worked him like a navvy, and never given him enough pocket money to keep him in tobacco even. It's hard on him when the Morrison boys and the Rosses have their own money to spend, and everybody saying we're better off than any of the people about. You wouldn't have stood so much yourself at his age."

"Whist, woman," he said pettishly, his head bent, as if he were trying to catch the sound of distant hoof-beats.

"Of course you'd take sides with him!"

"Oh Donald, isn't it yourself in him that's making him like this," she cried. "Isn't it your own blood speaking in all his high-handed ways? What did you think your son would be to take the sort of treatment you've given him from any man—even his own father? You should have stayed on the farm in the old country

if you'd wanted that sort of man for a son. If you hadn't wanted Davey to have a high spirit you should never have come over the sea here. You shouldn't have had me to come with you for his mother . . ."

Donald Cameron dropped into his chair. His face was grey and lined, as if the light behind it were extinguished.

"Be quiet, will you not, woman," he said.

"I will not!" There was a spark in her eyes. "I've got to say what I'm thinking, now, Donald Cameron. I've held my tongue long enough. You've had your way, and I've hardly dared to breathe when you spoke, for years. Your always laying your will on people crushes the spirit in them! The dominating way you have wants to lay down everything before it. But I'm glad you've not crushed Davey—though it's breaking my heart to think of his going away from us. I'd rather have it than see him grow into the creeping, crawling thing Nat Johnson is. Davey's got in him what brought you and me here. I'm glad he's got that spirit. There's no fear in it—it goes straight forward. You've grown old and I've grown old," she continued breathlessly. "We've lost all our fire, but he's got it—it's going on in him. And you with your old ideas—you don't like it—but he's got to be free—he's got to go his own way—he's got to break his own earth, Donald."

Donald Cameron moved restively.

"It's from his mother he's taken his liking for clacking words, then," he said.

She fell back from him with a little desperate gesture that she had made so little headway against the stone-wall of his mind.

"Will you not go after him to Wirreeford and get him to come home again?" she asked pitifully. "He is a clever lad. He'll be a credit and joy to us yet, if you'll

only give him his head for a bit, Donald. This at McNab's doesn't mean anything; it's only to put you right with the people here, really—and because he's troubled in his mind about something else!"

"What do you mean?"

His eyebrows twitched, his sharp eyes settled on her.

"There's a girl on his mind," she replied hesitatingly.

"Jess Ross?" he asked. "I'd fixed in my mind for him to marry her."

"Well," there was the glimmer of a smile in her eyes. "It's not Jessie that Davey's got fixed in his mind to marry, so perhaps it's just as well you should be away from each other for a while."

"One of the Wirree girls—lag's daughters, every one of them!"

His fingers drummed on the arm of his chair.

A shade of sadness had fallen on Mrs Cameron's face.

"Well . . . you—you won't get Davey to come home, or let me try?" she asked, her heart fainting at her own words.

"No." He repeated the word slowly as if in fear that his tongue would give effect to other stirrings of his brain. "Of his own will he went—of his own will he'll come back again."

"Would you have in like circumstances?" she asked.

He did not reply.

"He's our only one, Donald," she pleaded.

"He's my son. But what's the meaning of these?" he said, shuffling the handful of McNab's papers Davey had thrown down. "Did I ever make bills like this for myself? Haven't I worked and slaved year in and year out. Did I ever throw away roistering what he has?"

Mary looked at the bills. She had not seen them before.

"Oh," she said, slowly, "that's the bad blood of me in him. My people were all a spendthrift lot, and I've never been able to keep anything at all myself, whether it was love, or money, or a shawl, or even a spirit of my own to go through my life with."

She picked up the tray with Davey's untouched meal on it, and went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXVII

A SOU'WESTER was tearing across the plains, threatening to sweep the whole Wirree township off its foundations and dash the fragments of the mud houses against the hills. It broke round the Black Bull with the noise of great guns, and in the pauses of its blowing the booming of the sea on the beaches five miles away could be heard.

When Davey burst open the door he brought a gust of wind into the tap-room that set the lights sputtering and flaring. Two of them went out. The glasses on McNab's bench danced as he hammered it with his fists.

"For two pins I'd thrash you," he yelled. "You got me into borrowing money from you. I was a blamed young fool! But what's your game? What do you mean playing fair to me and then giving me away to the old man. A neat way of bleeding him, that's what it was. Getting me in here drunk and then——"

The Schoolmaster was playing cards with a couple of men on an upturned box behind the door. He threw down his cards and took Davey's arm.

The boy threw it off.

"Leave me alone, Mr. Farrel," he cried. "I'd sweep the floor with the—the damned swine, if he were worth sweeping the floor with. You're all afraid of him. Well, I'm not! You see here, Mister McNab," he leant across the bar and his eyes burnt their way into the pale shifty eyes of Thad McNab. "I'll break every bone in your body if you ever interfere between me and mine again.

D'you hear that? I don't know what you've got up your sleeve, and I don't care! You just keep it there, see, or it'll be the worse for you."

McNab had blenched at the boy's headlong passion. The quivering long arms seemed scarcely able to keep themselves off his miserable shoulders.

His skin was the gingery colour of his hair, and though he grinned feebly, looking everywhere but at Davey, there was not a man who did not see he was trembling. Thad McNab was a coward, everybody knew that. There was nothing in the world he feared more than the vengeance which might wreak itself on his miserable body. As Young Davey stamped out of the bar there was a rustle of movement, smothered oaths of surprise and amusement, a swinging of eyes after him with something of admiration and applause in them; but McNab was recovering himself. He gazed speechlessly after the boy too; there was a ghost of a smile on his face. His mind was working; his lips moved though no words came. The men who had wanted to cheer Young Davey shifted their opinions uneasily. There would be more to score to McNab's account yet, they imagined.

The Schoolmaster did not follow Davey out of the bar as he felt inclined to; but when the boy had gone McNab looked across at him.

"That's what comes of interferin', Farrel," he said.

"You'll know better another time, won't you, McNab," the Schoolmaster drawled, looking up from the cards he was holding. "It's a bad business getting between father and son."

McNab's smile changed.

"I was alludin' to your interferin' when I had a bit of business on hand, Mr. Farrel," he snarled.

"Had you a bit of business on, Thad?" the Schoolmaster asked. "Who with? Davey? And did I inter-

fere? Well, now you beat me! Out with it! Let's hear all about it. We're all old friends here."

McNab's wrath surged so that he could not speak.

"There now!" Farrel cried. "He won't tell! Never mind, McNab, you came off very well! When Young Davey came in I thought he'd have you out on the road for a certainty, and he's a pretty bruiser. Showed him how to put up his fists myself a couple of years ago."

It was Dan's way of saying things, with a whimsicality, an inimitable geniality, tinged with sarcasm, that brought the house down.

When the men in the bar threw back their heads and stretched their lungs that night, Thad did not laugh. He stood, shivering, with gimlet flames in his eyes, his fingers twitching restlessly. There were drinks all round and the Schoolmaster played another rubber before he swung out of the shanty and into the wind that roared and beat over the plains.

Davey was waiting in the lee of the garden fence round Farrel's cottage, his little red mare set with her haunches against the wind.

"What is it, Davey?" the Schoolmaster asked when he saw him.

"It's this, Mr. Farrel," Davey said, on a short breath. "I've quarrelled with the old man. I want a job."

The cottage was in darkness. But after he had taken Davey to the stable and they had turned Red into it, they went indoors, and a light gleamed from the small square windows until the sky was waning on the edge of the plains. Then Davey came to the door and the Schoolmaster with him.

"It's not advice—as I told you—but a job I'm wanting," the boy said. His voice carried against the wind, hoarse with anger and disappointment.

"But this job, Davey, you know what it is."

The Schoolmaster's voice was troubled.

"Yes, I know—haven't I told you. As a matter of fact I haven't the price of food or a bed on me, and I'm not going back for it. You said these cattle of Maitland's in the yards would have to be taken to the hills. Maitland's got fattening paddocks up beyond Steve's, hasn't he? Tim and Pat Kearney have cleared off to the new rush, and you said you'd have to get somebody to take them for Conal."

"You can have what money——" the Schoolmaster began.

"It wasn't what I asked for," Davey said curtly.

None knew better than Farrel what the difficulties of his getting work of any sort would be in the Wirree with McNab's mark against him. In the hills no one would employ him for fear of offending Donald Cameron. But it was neither McNab, nor Donald Cameron, the Schoolmaster was thinking of when he tried to persuade the boy to go home. Not a word moved Davey from his purpose to be independent.

"If you take this mob to-morrow, you will clear out then and look for another job on the other side of the ranges?"

"Yes," Davey said eagerly.

"Right," the Schoolmaster replied, "but I don't want you in this business with Conal, Davey."

The boy gripped his hand.

"You said if ever I was hard-up for a friend," he said, "to come to you. And this job with those beasts of Maitland's is the only thing sticking out for me just now."

Farrel turned away wearily.

"I'd be glad enough to stand by you always, Davey," he said. "But this is different! I'd never forgive myself if I got you into a mess. However, it can't do any

harm your taking these beasts to Steve's. Deirdre and I'll be going up in a day or two. I'll tell Conal about it. Then you can go on over the ranges. There's always work on Middleton's or Yaraan. Come in now and I'll make you a cup of tea."

Davey glanced at the lightening dome of the sky.

"It's a couple of hours to dawn yet," he said, with a sigh. "Then I'll be going."

CHAPTER XXVIII

CONAL himself, on the road, met Davey behind Maitland's slowly moving, scraggy, high-ribbed cattle.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked, striding into Farrel's kitchen. "That kid of Cameron's——"

"Wanted a job," the Schoolmaster said. "He's quarrelled with his father."

"Does he know the game?"

The Schoolmaster nodded, staring over his pipe into the fire.

Conal threw off his hat. His eyes were blazing. The breath throbbed against the bare throat down which his beard climbed.

"Do you mean to say, you——"

The Schoolmaster's eye on his, halted his tongue.

"No. I don't mean to," he said slowly. He knocked the ash from his pipe. "By the way, Conal, who fixed the brands on that red bull? You know the beast I mean—small, square, blazed-face, sold in Port Southern last sales."

"I did."

Fighting Conal threw himself into a chair.

"Badly done," the Schoolmaster murmured, gazing before him. "He, Young Davey, twiggied it. He's been holding his tongue—for what reason I don't know—but he told me because he wanted this job. I gave it to him. Thad's got his knife into him."

"Then why on earth did you want to take him on and get Thad on our tracks?"

"Don't take orders from Thad yet, do you, Conal?"

Conal fidgeted under that glint in Dan's eye.

"No," he growled, "you know I don't, but there's no good I can see in running against him. What does this kid want anyhow? Why, there's more than a dozen of Cameron's cows in the mob I'm after now."

The log that had been smouldering all day on the open hearth broke and fell with a shattering of embers.

"Tell you the truth, Conal," the Schoolmaster looked straight out before him. "There's something in McNab's eyes tells me he's got his suspicions—well, if he has—it's time to get out. You've had luck so far. But there's something about McNab keeps making me feel as if he were promising himself something on my account, saying to himself: 'There's something coming to you!' Of course he thinks I'm in this business with you."

Conal shifted his position and swore impatiently.

"I'd better keep out of your way—that's what it amounts to, Dan!"

"No," the Schoolmaster said, "not that! Let McNab think what he likes as far as I'm concerned. Only he hasn't any particular quarrel with you, Conal, and he has with me—and if he tripped you up trying to get at me it would be a bad business."

Conal leant forward.

"Things are tightening up north, too?" he said, "I mean to quit, Dan. Maitland knows I do his business—and a little bit extra on my own account. That doesn't worry him so long as he gets a fancy price for the beasts. I want to pull off this last 'lift' and then turn the game down altogether. I wish you were in this with me though you've never been in any but square jobs before. I've been spying out the land—took a short cut from Rane and got into the back hills. Sent Tim and Pat on with those scraggs of Maitland's! Picked up Teddy at Steve's."

There's not much he doesn't know about the ways of scrub cattle. Trust a black ! He took me down Narrow Valley to the plains. We laid a couple of hours under cover in the dark. Then the moon rose, and you should 've seen the mob go stringin' out across the plains—lookin' no more than a drove of rats in the dim light. It's a pretty good bunch, rollin' fat—and prices high. I mean to pick it up. Wouldn't 've known anything about it but for you—it's out of my beat. You ought to have a whack of the profits, Dan."

Both men were silent for a few moments. Only the fire creaked in the quiet room.

"When I'm through with this bit of work, I'll get out and set up on the respectable somewhere. We could take up a couple of hundred acres on our own account, you and me," Conal murmured; "go to church, wear long-tailed coats, ring-on some fancy speechifyin'. Me 'n Deirdre 'd sing in the choir. When this is all through, there's something I'll want to be saying to you, Dan."

There was another moment's dreaming silence. The Schoolmaster spoke with a sudden resolution.

"No," he said. "Do what you like yourself, Conal, but I made up my mind long ago not to have anything to do with 'cross' jobs. I'm not in this. I don't want to be—and I'll have nothing to do with the proceeds."

"You call, Dan!" Conal rose from his seat by the fire with a gesture of disappointment. "It'll be full moon to-morrow night and I'm goin' to make a dash for 'm. Teddy and I ran up a yard near the old hut in Narrow Valley. That's what's been keeping me. Steve's goin' to send tucker and fire-irons down to-day."

"What about young Cameron?" the Schoolmaster asked.

"We'll have to keep an eye on him. You don't suppose he'll blab, do you? You say he knows the game

already and hasn't. But we can't afford to take chances."

"But he's not to be dragged in, Conal!"

Conal threw back his head, laughing.

"Well, I want another man," he said. "As for being dragged in, he won't be dragged in. But did you ever hear of a youngster who'd sit behind the door and suck his thumbs while there was moonlighting in the air? It won't be a case of draggin' him in, but keepin' him out. After all, it's the sport makes it worth while—the waiting, rush, fight and carryin' through of things."

He stretched his long limbs.

"But I won't have Davey 'working' with you, Conal," the Schoolmaster said angrily.

Deirdre came into the room, a little bonnet over her head and a long black cloak covering her. There was a wild colour the wind had whipped into them in her cheeks and her eyes were shining.

"You, Conal!" she cried eagerly when she saw the tall figure of the drover. "When did you get back?"

Conal saw only her shining eyes and the fluttering line of her mouth. He stood stock-still staring at her. It did not occur to his simple mind to ask whether it was for him her eyes were shining. Only that glad and eager note in her voice pleased him.

The Schoolmaster had heard people say that Deirdre was beautiful; but she had never seemed more beautiful than she was this evening, when she came out of the gloom, bringing into the quiet room and across the threshold of his troubled thoughts, her youth and buoyancy of spirit, the whole secret and subtle essence of her femininity in bloom.

"Oh I—I've just got back and came to see your father at once, Deirdre," was all Conal could say.

"Did you have a good trip?" she asked, taking off her hat and coat.

He wondered how much of his enterprise she knew. But there was no shadow on her face.

"Yes, all right," he said, a little awkwardly.

"I saw Mrs. Cameron at the store, father," she continued, busy with her own thoughts, and turning over in her mind what Mrs. Cameron had said to her, what she had said to Mrs. Cameron, and the plot, light as a spider's web, that they had woven between them for Davey's benefit.

"And as I was coming along home," she laughed blithely, "who did I meet on the road but Pat Glynn! And he put this little parcel into my hand, and said that he had been told to give it to me. He made me promise not to open it until I got in, too!"

She tore the wrappings of brown paper and newspaper from a little brown box, opened it and drew out a heavy, old-fashioned necklace made of links and twists of gold, with a locket set with rubies and pearls at the end of it.

"Oh, isn't it pretty!" she cried.

The Schoolmaster stared at it, and on Conal's face a thunder-cloud of resentment gathered.

"Who did he tell you sent it?" the Schoolmaster asked.

"He wouldn't say—only that it was from a 'devoted admirer.'"

"Have you any idea who it's from?" Dan asked, anger and anxiety struggling within him.

Deirdre looked up at Conal.

"It's not from you, Conal?" she asked, hesitatingly. He shook his head.

"Perhaps it was Davey?"

She looked at the Schoolmaster.

"No," he said, "Davey had no money, I know, so he

couldn't have sent it. You've no idea of any one else ? ”

“ No.” The light had gone from her face.

Conal seized his hat. His mouth set in an ugly line.

“ I'll go and see Pat,” he said.

The door slammed behind him.

Deirdre stood looking down on the glimmering thing in her hand.

“ You're not to wear it, Deirdre,” the Schoolmaster said harshly. Her eyes flew to his. He caught a reflection of his own spirit in them.

“ Do you think I'd be likely to,” she said.

It was hours later when Conal slammed the door of the cottage again. The suppressed rage in him burned to white ash.

“ He's gone—Pat Glynn ! ” he said angrily. “ I've ransacked the place for him. He's melted into thin air. I've been out along the Rane road and half way into the Port ; but he's done the disappearing trick. There's not a track of him anywhere.”

CHAPTER XXIX

"So you're goin' to Steve's, Deirdre?"

It was Thad McNab who spoke. He stood on the doorstep in the sunshine, his yellow face thrust through the doorway, the pale eyes in it, smiling.

Deirdre was putting the last of her ribbands, handkerchiefs and little personal belongings into a small canvas saddle-bag. McNab's voice startled her. She glanced across at him.

"Yes," she said. The sight of his crooked figure there, in the doorway, with the sunlight playing across it, brought her a sense of uneasy wondering.

Quite suddenly, the night before, Farrel had decided to go up to the hills with Conal in the morning. He had told Deirdre to follow them as soon as she had set the cottage in order and collected her clothes. She wanted to go with them, but there were a hundred and one things to keep her busy in the house—dishes to scour, floors to sweep, covers and crockery to lock away in the cupboards. She had just quenched the fire. The ashes were smoking behind her, under the water she had poured over them, when McNab appeared. The township was well astir by this time. The Schoolmaster had talked of going to Steve's for long enough; she did not expect anyone to be surprised at it. He did not seem to expect that anyone would be surprised either, though he had made up his mind rather suddenly the night before, and had told

her to ride out quietly and without chattering to anyone in the morning.

Yet McNab seemed surprised and annoyed. She wondered how he knew so soon that the Schoolmaster had gone with Conal. It was very early. The sunshine was still of an untarnished brilliance. Mrs. Mary Ann's ducks and geese were making their first trip in wavering white and mottled lines to the shallow pools left by the tide beside the river. Deirdre could see them through the open doorway.

"Mighty sudden the Schoolmaster made up his mind, eh, my blackbird?" Thad said, with, what for him was geniality, though geniality on his voice had a sour sound.

He shuffled into the room and stood near her.

Deirdre folded a ribband and packed it into her bag. She made a great appearance of being busy, going to and from the kitchen and the cupboards, wrapping up and putting into the bag all manner of things that she had not meant to take, in order that she might not be still to look at, or to talk to McNab. She did not want him to see how the sight of him had set her heart throbbing, a little nervous pulse fluttering in her throat. His nearness filled her with a sick fear, but she would not have had McNab guess it. She knew the shrewd sharpness of those pale, shifty eyes of his. Her eyes met his clearly. There was not a flicker of the smooth, white lids above them.

"Oh, no," she said, "he'd fixed to go to-day, some-time ago."

"Well, he might 've said so," replied McNab. "There was something I wanted to talk to him about, something—partic'lar."

"Can I tell him what it is?"

His eyes fell before the clear innocence of her gaze. He moved uneasily.

"No," he said, "I dursay I'll find time to go and see him up at Steve's one of these days. Tell him that . . . I'll come soon." He chuckled a moment. "They tell me," he went on, eyeing her narrowly, "they tell me, he's taken that cub of Cameron's with him."

He did not wait for her reply, but ran on, the malice that was never far from it an undercurrent in his voice again.

"He's not very clever, your father, my dear, for all he's a schoolmaster, or he wouldn't have done that! Give him my respects and say I hope the hills'll be for the good of his health. And you—I hope you'll be enjoyin' y'rself up there. Though it's no place to be buryin' the most beautiful woman in the South."

"Well, I'll have to be going now!" Deirdre moved quickly.

He had edged nearer and nearer her, until his breath touched her face as she pulled the strings of her bag together.

"Socks has been saddled this half hour. Father'll be glad to see you any day at Steve's, I'm sure, Mr. McNab," she added, backing towards the door.

McNab got between her and it. He put his hand on her arm.

"My, the pretty neck it is," he gurgled, his voice deep in his throat. "But where's the gold chain Pat Glynn told me he had for you from a—'devoted admirer,' no less. A gold chain it was, with rubies and pearls on it—fit for a lady to wear! And there's more for you, where it come from. The one that sent it would dress you up like the finest lady in the land, Pat said, if you would——"

Deirdre wrenched herself away from the clutching hands. They caught at her again.

"You must kiss me good-bye then, pretty," he whispered.

She saw the flame in his eyes, the wry smile on his lips.

The chestnut was standing saddled, his bridle over the post by the door. Deirdre leapt to his back, her bag in her hand.

Thad followed her out-of-doors and stood watching her, rubbing his hands together.

"So shy, my blackbird, so shy!" he exclaimed, almost gleefully. "Never mind. Another day, perhaps!"

Deirdre looked down at him, her eyes blazing.

"If father heard you talking like that, he'd thrash you within an inch of your life," she cried passionately.

McNab lost countenance.

"Eh, would he?" he snarled.

The fear of death and revenge, the dealing out to himself of what he had dealt so often to others, was the continual dogging terror that haunted him. Then he smiled again and chuckled.

"If I let him, eh, my pretty," he said, gazing up at her. "If I let him. I wouldn't advise you to . . . to tell him . . . create bad feelin' between us . . . it'd be a pity . . . seeing . . . me and y'r father's pretty good friends, and they say it's better to make a friend than an enemy of McNab. Besides it was only my little bit of fun, Deirdre. Haven't I known you since you were—so high."

Deirdre turned the chestnut to the road.

"Good-bye, me dear," McNab called. "And my respects to the Schoolmaster, don't forget! Tell him I think it was mean to do me the trick of clearin' out without lettin' me know though, 'n me wantin' to stand by him

in any little bit of trouble that's comin' to him. But I'll be comin' up to see him, soon—sooner than he thinks—p'raps."

There was a warning, a veiled threat, in the words.

As the chestnut flew out along the green roadsides, that mean voice with its geniality and thin-edged malice, reverberated in Deirdre's ears. She looked back when she was some distance out on the flat road that wound over the plains to the hills, and saw McNab hobbling back towards the whitewashed irregular and dilapidated huts of the Wirree township. Her eyes went out to the ranges with an eager sigh. She quickened the chestnut's pace again with a rub of her heels on his sleek side.

CHAPTER XXX

DEIRDRE'S spirits rose as White Socks climbed the steep track of the foot-hills. She drew the strong, sweet leafy smells of the trees with eager breaths. Tying her hat to the saddle, she threw back her head to the sunshine, exclaiming with delight to see the red and brown prickly-shrub blossom out among the ferns, sunlight making the young leaves hang upon the saplings in flakes of translucent green, ruddy-gold and amber.

She talked to Socks and called to the birds that flitted across the track. It was so good to be in the hills again, climbing the long, winding path through the trees. She wanted to catch the sunshine in her hands; it hung in such yarns of palpable gold stuff across the track. She sang softly to herself, gazing into the blue haze that stood among the near trees.

The valleys were steeped in sun mists. Her little horse ambled easily through them, and when he climbed the steep hill sides, she slipped from his back and walked beside him, asking him again and again, if it were not good to be going to Steve's, to the paddocks where Socks himself had flung up his heels an unbroken colt, and all the gay, careless days of her childhood had been spent. She felt as if they were leaving the reek and squalor of the Wirree River for ever.

And yet the vague uneasiness McNab's words had evoked hovered in her mind. His eyes, gestures, ugly writhing smile, kept recurring to her. She was anxious to get to the Schoolmaster and give him McNab's

message, to know what he would make of it. What harm was it McNab could do her father? She knew that Dan feared him, in a curious, watchful way. And the trouble that was coming to him. What had McNab meant by that? This business Conal was on, what was it? Why had she been told nothing about it? The way McNab had talked to her, too, disquieted her.

All day a premonition of trouble haunted her. She urged the chestnut on. When they splashed through a creek at midday, she let him stand for a few minutes in the middle of it, dip his patchy white nose into the clear, cold water, and sough it up noisily. A little further on, near a gully in which the mists were unfathomable, the trees, grey as sea lichen in its depths, she sat down by the roadside and ate her sandwich of bread and cheese and had a drink from her bottle of milk.

Davey and she had often made excursions to Long Gully when they were children to hear the bell-birds. They dropped mellow notes through the stillness of the trees that climbed the gully's steep sides. Davey and she had crept warily through the undergrowth, on the lookout for snakes, and had sat still for hours behind a fallen tree, listening for the plomp, plomp, plomp of the shy birds' notes of purest melody thrown into the pool of the silence.

A dead tree stood near the edge of the track. Deirdre remembered that there had been a magpie's nest in it, and that the "maggies" would swoop down on her and on Davey in the springtime, if there were young birds in the nest, screaming and flapping their wings, and sometimes getting in a peck which brought the blood to her freckled face or to Davey's. She glanced up to see if the magpies were about that day; but they were not.

So gaunt and tall the dead tree stood. Its branches

seemed to strike against the sky. They rattled with the sound of bones in the wind. The sun and thrashing winter storms had bleached it, and there were black wales and scars where a fire had eaten into the wood above the hacked zone that the axe of a settler had made when he ring-barked it years ago. As long as she could remember the dead tree had stood there, gaunt and ghostly, with the tangle of living trees behind it. They were clad with their shifting, whispering garment of leaves all the year round, and decked with flowers in the spring-time. But the dead tree was naked. It might have been an avenging spirit of the wilderness, it stood with an air of such tragic desolation by the wayside.

There were dead trees all along the hill roads ; scores of them in the paddocks. The ripping crack and thunder of their crashing to the earth could be heard in the dead of night sometimes. When they thought of it, country folk moved from under a dead tree. Deirdre looked up at this one. It seemed to waver in the wind. She shook the crumbs from her skirt, and caught the chestnut's bridle.

Scarlet-runners were overhanging the bank on that turn of the road, near where the school had been, when she passed. The chimney of the hut was still standing, though the wild creepers had thrown long vines about it. Supple-jack had clambered over the half-dozen twisted fruit trees ; it threw its shower of feathery, seeding thistle-down over the dark-leaved apple branches.

Deirdre had meant to take Socks into the clearing, and let him feed on the wild oats and clover matting it, while she investigated the forlorn chimney and the fruit trees and flowers growing near where her garden had been, seeking in the tangled undergrowth for the flowers she had planted long ago. She had thought

she would sit on the edge of the well, listen for the great green frogs to go dropping into the water, and weave her dreams of the old times for awhile, watching the sunlight make a patchwork of dancing light with the shadows the leaves of the fruit trees cast on the beaten yard about the doorway of the hut. But she went straight by with scarcely a glance at the grey chimney and the tangled garden greenery, across which a tall, sweet English rose nodded gaily. She only stopped a moment to pull a trail of scarlet-runners from the bank near the house.

She wondered if Davey had remembered the place and the flowers when he passed the day before. She looked down at the scarlet flowers with a little smile, as she pinned them into her dress.

But thought of the flowers and of Davey lasted only a moment. She was eager to ask the Schoolmaster for an explanation, and to hear from him what they had to fear from McNab.

When she saw Dan, with the sun behind him, coming towards her on his big grey nag, whose nose was so like a kangaroo's that they called him "the 'Roo," she quickened her pace, her heart swelling with love at the sight of him, and at the thought of the concern which had sent him back along the road to meet her.

She lifted her face to his with a breathless little glad sob when she came up to him.

"What is it?" he asked, his anxiety leaping instinctively at the sight of her face.

"Perhaps I'm foolish," she said quickly. "It's something McNab said before I left this morning. It wasn't so much what he said, but the way he said it. And I've been thinking of it all the way—wondering what he meant. Is there any harm he could do us?"

"What did he say?" Farrel asked.

"He came just as I was going," Deirdre told him, "and he seemed annoyed that you didn't tell him you were going to-day—said there was something particular he wanted to talk to you about. Then just as I was going, he said: 'It was a mean trick clearin' out without lettin' me know—such old friends as we are too, and me wanting to stand by him in any little bit of trouble that's coming to him. But I'll be coming up to see him one of these days soon—sooner than he thinks p'raps.' It wasn't so much what he said as the way he said it, made me think——"

Deirdre hesitated, looking at her father's face. She knew that he was troubled, that there was enough in this to disturb him without telling him what else McNab had said to her.

They rode on in silence, the horses brushing.

The Schoolmaster's head was bent in thought. He rode in easy, slouching, negligent fashion, and seemed to have forgotten he was not alone. Deirdre spoke first. Her voice had a quick, low-toned intensity.

"I made up my mind on the way, to-day, to ask you what this business is Conal's on, and if you are with him, or not?" she said. "I ought to know. I'm not a child, and I'm with you whatever it is. I have an idea; but you ought to tell me, more than ever now that McNab——"

"Has his suspicions."

The Schoolmaster looked into her steady eyes.

"Are you in this with Conal?" she asked.

"I wasn't until last night," he said. "I changed my mind suddenly and joined him."

"What made you?" she inquired breathlessly.

He did not reply.

"I know—it was that necklace!" The reason had come to her instantly.

"I'm a good-for-nothing now, Deirdre," he said low and bitterly. "There's mighty little I can do . . . and there'll be less presently. I want enough money to get us away from here—and keep us by and by when——"

He did not say it, but she knew that he meant when the night of blindness had fallen on him.

"It was because you were afraid for me," she murmured. "Afraid because of that necklace, who it might have come from, afraid——"

He nodded.

"And if you get the money we can go away from here and never come back to the Wirree River any more?"

The Schoolmaster smiled. He was surprised at the eagerness of her voice.

"Yes," he said, "but that was what was bothering me. I thought you would not like to be leaving the place. You were always wanting to come back when we were away before."

"Oh," a little fluttering sigh went out of her, "but I'll be glad to go now! Tell me what you're going to do?"

"There's moonlight to-night, and we want to get a mob of wild cattle," he said quietly. "A couple of hundred are eating their heads off in the scrub above Narrow Valley. Do you remember when we were living here, riding up the range, sometimes we'd start a cow, or steer, and it would plunge away through the brushwood, scared as a rabbit! After the fires more breakaways joined the mob. We lost a couple of cows—so did Steve—others did too. Well, I told Conal about these beasts a while ago. He made up his mind to get them. He and Steve's black boy 've run up a stockyard near McMillan's hut in Narrow Valley, and

Conal and he mean to take the mob with that lot of Maitland's cattle he brought down for fattening, not this, but last trip, up by the Snowy River into New South Wales.

"It isn't as you may say, permitted by law," he continued. "But most of the cattle men who can do it, do—even the squatters when they get a chance. Down here they don't think scrub cattle worth the getting. Rosses staked a couple of horses a month or two ago, and lost a good dog after this mob. Cameron doesn't think them worth his while, so why shouldn't we have them if we can get them. If we get a couple of beasts with brands on them, among the wild ones, it may be worth drafting them out and driving them back to the hills. But the hair grows thick on scrub cattle; there's no need to be brand hunting. If Conal weren't such a fine stockman, we couldn't do it. There's nobody like him.

"When we pull off this deal, we'll go away, you and Conal and I. If the price of cattle keeps up there'll be enough to divide among the three of us—Davey's got to have his share if he's in. Conal's offered him a third to work with him to-night, and run the mob through to the border. He's a man short. I've been trying to persuade Davey to keep out of it—but there's a lot of Donald Cameron in him—he's as obstinate as a mule. Says he wants a job, and has got one, and that's enough for him for the present."

They had come within sight of Steve's shanty on the brow of the hill.

When they drew rein before Steve's, Conal lounged out of the house. The dogs that had started up snarling at the approach of horses stretched themselves again in the dust by the verandahs, and lay with their heads low on their forelegs. Deirdre stood a moment looking

about her. Her face, under the flat little yellow straw hat crossed by a red ribband that tied under her chin, was very winsome, her eyes bright with tears and laughter. When she saw Steve in the doorway, she ran to him and threw her arms around him.

"Oh, it's good to be here again, Uncle Stevie," she cried.

He chuckled delightedly.

"There's a woman you are, Deirdre. A woman y've grown!"

"What else would I grow?" she asked gaily.

"It's good to be anywhere you are, Deirdre!" Conal said, coming up and standing beside them, all his love in his eyes.

She laughed, glancing up at him, and Steve laughed to see the way the wind blew. Davey by the open door, watched them; but Deirdre did not see him.

When she moved to go in, he stood away from the door for her to pass. He saw the scarlet-runners that she had tucked into her gown under her chin. She heard the catch in his breath, and hesitated.

Conal saw her hand go out to him. He saw Davey take it, but he did not see the eyes she turned on him, nor hear her say with a tremulous quiver of the lips:

"They're saying they're glad to see me! Will you not say so too, Davey?"

The Schoolmaster, coming back from the stables, called Conal.

"McNab's been to see Deirdre," he said. "He's got an idea something's in the wind, she seems to think. It's just as well we fixed for to-night, Conal. It won't give him any time to get busy. But hadn't you better be getting down to cover before it's much later?"

"It's only a couple of miles, by the track Teddy goes. There's time enough yet," Conal replied, his eyes

on the open door, gaping dark against the brightness of the sunshine.

Davey followed Deirdre indoors.

"Teddy's bringing in the horses now. You'd better get in and have something to eat. Send Davey to me," Farrel said impatiently.

Conal crossed the verandah.

It was in the wide, low-roofed kitchen that he found Davey. Deirdre was standing near him. Only the glow of the firelight lighted the great room; but that was sufficient to show him the sombre, steadfast gaze with which Davey regarded the girl, and something subdued in the droop of her figure, a something of emotion, humiliation in her averted head.

"Dan wants you," he said to Davey.

Davey had stared at Deirdre as though he were trying to read in her face what his heart ached to know, and she had been waiting for him to read and know, waiting for the first sound of his voice with a tremulous expectancy. A moment more might have ended the year-long griefs and heartache between them. But Conal spoke, and Davey wheeled out of the kitchen.

Conal strode over to the table near which Davey had been. He swung his leg over it, and watched Deirdre as she put cups and saucers, plates and knives on one end of it. She cut some bread and buttered it.

There was a light in her eyes, a colour in her cheeks. She had watched Davey go with a little gesture of impatience, a fluttering sigh. Conal saw that. She turned to him gaily, poured out tea for him, chattering, but avoided his eyes. He watched her with a smouldering suspicion.

Suddenly he leant forward and caught her hand. His swart, leathern face swung towards her; the brilliant, hawk eyes of Conal, the Fighter, leapt into hers.

"You're to marry me, Deirdre," he said, his voice hoarse and throbbing in his throat.

She shrank from him with a little breathless exclamation.

"Don't do that," he cried passionately. "Don't look at me like that, Deirdre."

"Conal!" she gasped.

In his eyes rose the appeal of dumb, unfathomable, devouring tenderness.

"Say you'll love me . . . say you will, Deirdre," he begged.

His face was turned towards her, humble and mysteriously moved, a strong light in his eyes.

So absorbed were they that they did not hear, or if they heard, paid no attention to the grind of wheels on the gravel before the shanty, the yelping and snarling of dogs that announced the arrival of a vehicle at Steve's, and such late arrivals were not usual.

"I've had my way with women. They've told you tales of me, I know," Conal pleaded. "But there's never a woman I've cared for but you, Deirdre. And you——" he broke off impatiently, "there's no telling you how I care for you. I haven't got words. Besides, it chokes me to speak of it; raises a storm in me that there's no holding. By and by when this is all over, we'll go away—you and the Schoolmaster and me. Oh, I'll be a good husband. You'll give me y'r word, won't you, Deirdre?"

There were voices in the bar beyond, but they did not heed them. Conal was thinking only of her and his pleading.

"Conal dear," Deirdre said. "If you wouldn't talk like this any more!"

Her eyes fell from his. He snatched her hand from the flower under her chin where it had fallen.

"Is it him you love?" he asked fiercely, jerking his

head in the direction of the back door by which Davey had gone out. "Is it? Tell me. I'll let no man come between you and me, Deirdre. I'll kill him if he tries to."

The door from the tap-room, with the sunlight splashing on the benches and bottles behind it, opened, and Steve and the new arrival came into the kitchen.

"And who is it y'll be killing now, Conal?" asked McNab genially.

He glanced from Conal to Deirdre.

"You, if you don't get out of my way," yelled Conal, quivering with rage.

Brushing past McNab, he flung out of the room, his spurs jingling. They heard the irons on his boots click on the stones of the yard.

"There now," cried Steve tremulously. "He's been making love to you, has he, Deirdre? All the boys 'll be making love to you, Deirdre! And now here's Mr. McNab come up to see the Schoolmaster . . . most partic'lar."

He was altogether flustered at this unexpected visit of McNab's, and at his wits' end what to say next. Dan was in the paddock with the black boy, bringing in the horses for the night's work, and here was McNab on the top of it all.

Deirdre's wits were quicker to work than his.

She realised what McNab's being in the shanty that night might mean to the Schoolmaster, Conal, Davey and herself.

She smiled at him. McNab had not seen her smile like that except at Conal, and that was on the night of the Schoolmaster's return, at the dance at Hegarty's.

"Why there's a surprise to play on me, Mr. McNab?" she cried merrily. "You to be coming up the hills to-day and never say a word about it this morning. There

I was, riding along by myself, and might have had a seat in the cart beside you."

McNab hardly knew what to make of her greeting. He imagined that she had been thinking over his attentions of the morning, and was feeling flattered by them—for after all was he not Thadeus McNab and, the gossips said, the richest man in the country side, not excepting Donald Cameron himself, if the truth were known. He thought that she was willing to coquet with him, and that, too, the hint about the gold chain might not have been in vain.

He warmed to her smile, preened himself and gave himself half a dozen gallant airs on the spot. Every male instinct in him responded to her effort to be charming.

"And now everybody's had tea but me," she continued. "So we can just sit down and have some together."

McNab sat down beside her at the big table on which she had spread a white cloth.

A generous and genial glow suffused him. For the moment he forgot the reason of his visit. Deirdre had put it all out of his head with that smile of hers. The sound of her merry voice set every fibre of him tingling and thrilling as his fibres had never tingled and thrilled before.

CHAPTER XXXI

IN the yard Conal told the Schoolmaster of McNab's arrival.

"Settles us," Farrel said shortly. "That's what he came to do. And we can't afford to let him think there's anything on. He's given his suspicions to M'Laughlin most likely and the delay to-night 'll give them time to get the word out about us along the road. So all we can do is lie low, play civil to McNab, let him think he's on the wrong track. Then when this blows over—in a couple of months, perhaps——"

Conal swore bitterly.

"I could have wrung his neck when I saw him. It was all I could do to keep me hands off him," he said.

"Don't be giving the game away, Conal," the Schoolmaster cautioned. "Mind, we're not taking chances."

"It'll be a couple of hours to moonrise after dark," Conal said restively, glancing at the waning sky. "If you could keep him busy, playing cards and drinking—let him think we weren't upset at seeing him and he seems to be settlin' down and looking foolish findin' we're all about—I might walk out after a bit. I could get the beasts, with Davey and that blithering half-breed. Sally's easily worth a couple of men with cattle."

"Do you think I'm likely to be able to keep McNab so busy, he wouldn't notice you were walking out?" the Schoolmaster asked, impatiently. "You and Davey had better come in and hang round loose presently."

He went towards the house.

His greeting of McNab was as lukewarm, negligent and friendly as it always was. Deirdre saw no flicker of anxiety in his face. McNab's eyes were quick and keen on it for the first few minutes, but finding no trace of repressed excitement, not a spark of the impatience he expected, but only a whimsical smile to convey that the Schoolmaster knew why he had come, and was amused at the reason, he dropped into the chair he had taken and sought to cover the unexpectedness of his visit by unusual affability.

He was sitting in Steve's chair by the fire when Farrel came into the room that was kitchen, dining-room, sitting-room, and living-room in general at Steve's. Deirdre slipped out with a jug for water as the Schoolmaster came in. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw her talking to Conal in the yard.

When she returned, her laughter and gaiety surprised him. She set a jug of grog between Steve and McNab on the table near McNab's elbow. The Schoolmaster swore beneath his breath when he saw McNab's eyes on her.

He trembled with rage when he heard Deirdre talking to McNab; but her eyes met his reassuringly. He caught their message, calm and purposeful. He knew that she was playing the woman to McNab, and why. The knowledge angered and humiliated him.

Davey and Conal came into the long, barely-lighted room. They threw themselves on a bench near the door. Conal, taking a pipe from his belt, smoked morosely. Davey did not look at McNab, and McNab took no notice of him, enjoying his position of importance by the fireside, and chuckling over the gay chatter Deirdre threw to him.

"We eat our heads off, up here, Mr. McNab," she said. "And sleep! Davey and Conal there, to see them

yawning over their supper to-night you'd think they'd never seen a bed for weeks. They've been saying they're going to turn in early because they've to go off mustering first thing in the morning, and father and Steve would have sat here dozing by the fire for a while, and then gone off to bed too. I was thinking I would have to take out my sewing and talk to the cat . . . till it was a decent hour to be saying my prayers. But now p'raps you'll have a game of cards with me, though I don't suppose Conal and Davey 'll go to bed early now, seeing we've got company."

Davey sat bolt upright against the wall. It froze the blood in his veins to hear her on such terms of easy familiarity with McNab. Conal shifted uneasily.

"But we can get along without them, can't we?" Deirdre asked blithely. "There's no need for them to be sitting up trying to be polite, is there?"

"None at all."

McNab chuckled. He thought he was getting on very well with Deirdre and that she was playing him off against Conal and Davey in a spirit of pique.

"Right. Good-night, McNab, see you in the morning," Conal said angrily. He swung out of the room. Davey followed him.

"And now for the business that brought you, McNab. Mighty kind of you to have come after me with it?"

The Schoolmaster sat down before Thad McNab, facing him squarely, his one eye played on McNab's shifty face. There was just the faintest ironical emphasis in his voice.

McNab stirred uneasily.

"Fact is," he began, his eyes shifted under the Schoolmaster's gaze. "Fact is—we're wanting a school in the Wirree," he plunged desperately. "Before you go away I thought—I thought, not knowing exactly what

your plans were, I'd have a talk to you about it. The place is gettin' a bad name with the children growing up not able to make more than a mark for their names. In the hills, of course, you taught the first generation, as you might say, so the older ones can teach the others coming on, but down there it's different. We've never had any school or school teachers. The people can't pay enough—just a few of them—to make it worth your while . . . but if we built a school, got 'em all together . . . it might be a good thing. 'I'd maybe put up the money for the school—maybe——"

He fidgeted in his seat. He did not want to commit himself too far, and yet he was irritably conscious of the weakness of his explanation unless he did. He had a suspicion that Dan Farrel was laughing at him up his sleeve too. An ill-humour was rising in him.

There was an ominous silence—a moment of suspicion and suspense. A word from either might have been a spark to the long-hidden train of enmity between them. Deirdre broke the silence. She threw down a pack of cards and pulled her chair up to the table.

"All that 'll keep till to-morrow, Mr. McNab, won't it?" she asked. "Have a game of euchre with Steve and me, now. Let's play cut-throat—it's more exciting. Father can think over what you've said and tell you in the morning."

"Yes . . . yes . . . you think it over, Farrel," McNab said eagerly.

He was glad enough to shelve discussion of this urgent matter which had brought him from the Wirree to talk to the Schoolmaster, seeing that it was not at all urgent and did not look like it.

Deirdre pushed the bottle of rum between him and

Steve. She sat opposite to them, the broad yellow glare of the dip on her face.

The liquor was already beginning to warm McNab's brain. His head was steady enough on his shoulders ; but there was a glow within him. He watched the face of the girl before him as in a dream.

Farrel saw the arabesques of red and blue the cards made under the light as she threw them on the table. He heard her gleeful and triumphant exclamations. He realised what she was doing for him, was sore and angry, but there was nothing to do but to play up to her. He sat at the far end of the table just out of the light : after a while his head drooped.

Deirdre's laughter flashed.

" Look at father," she cried, " he's dead with sleep ! "

Farrel started and stared at her, sleepily.

" It's no good your blinking like an owl and pretending you weren't taking forty winks. You'd better go to bed and have done with it," she said.

He struggled to his feet.

" I'm dog-weary," he muttered. " Think I will."

" Good-night," he added after a moment. " And be sure you see the fires are out before you turn in, Deirdre. You're not to be staying up late, either ! I won't have her getting too fond of the cards, Steve."

He stumbled across the room to the far end where a screen of brushwood and bagging against the back of the shanty made another small room.

Deirdre laughed again.

" I'm winning all the time," she said gaily, " so they won't want to play long."

The cards went backwards and forwards across the table to the tune of her exclamations and the chime of her laughter, the muttered oaths and exclamations of Steve and McNab. Steve was soggy with drink ; but McNab

was not as drunk as he seemed. His eyes caught hers with a curious expression when the Schoolmaster had gone from the room.

"And who's the man Conal's going to kill for comin' between you, Deirdre?" he asked.

"How do I know?" she said, a little nervously.

"P'raps it's the man sent you the gold chain," McNab murmured. His eyes glimmered at her out of the darkness. "They tell me Conal went round like a madman looking for Pat Glynn to tell him who it was, threatening to break the last bone in Pat's body if he wouldn't speak."

"Yes, I think it was him," Deirdre said, meeting his eyes. "Conal said if ever he found him, he'd——"

"Conal's a hot head doesn't mean half he says," McNab muttered.

"But he means that, I'm sure," Deirdre said. "And Conal's so strong. Look at his hands. He could put them round a man's throat and wring the life out of it—just as easily as you wring a bird's neck, Mr. McNab. And he's a dead shot, too, Conal—they say."

"Eh, then it's somebody's neck he'll be wringing, or somebody he'll be shooting, for sure," McNab said. "For it's not him you'll be marryin', and it's not him your heart's set on. It's the other."

The quivering of her face, a dilating of the pupils of her eyes that were wells of darkness, told him that he had scored. He leant forward, following up his advantage, eagerly.

"And it's not Conal, for all his blustering, I'm afraid of, my pretty," he whispered. His eyes were narrowed, the smile in them leaping across his face. "It's not Conal, for all his blustering, though I dursay y' think he'd kill me for love of you. And you'd break his heart for love of somebody else—by way of reward. But it's me all the same that'll get you."

Deirdre pushed back her chair. Then she remembered the part she had been playing all the evening. She steadied herself, putting her hands on the edge of the table, and looked down into McNab's eyes, laughing.

"Why," she cried, "you're as drunk as drunk, Mr. McNab! And so is Steve; you'd better see each other to bed. I'm going myself."

She went across to the corner-room next the Schoolmaster's, where she slept. When she had heard Steve shambling before McNab to the room off the bar where occasional visitors were put, she went back to the kitchen, raked over the embers of the fire, and put out a flare that was burning low in its tin of rancid fat and belching forth streams of heavy black smoke.

She opened the door of the Schoolmaster's room. The bunk against the wall on which he slept was empty, the window open. She entered, closed the door and sat down by the open window.

The moonlight was waning. The silver light in which the forest had been bathed an hour before, was dimmer, the shadows the house and sheds cast black against it. Where the light struck dead trees they stood out wraith-like from the dark wave of the forest.

Listening intently, she heard the distant cracking of whips, the long lowing, belched and terrified cries of cattle.

CHAPTER XXXII

WHEN McNab awakened in the morning, he realised that his sleep had been too heavy for him to know what had happened during the night, and that much might have occurred while he was snoring.

Farrel found him snapping and biting like a trapped dingo. His voice rasped ; his inquisitive, suspicious eyes were everywhere. But the Schoolmaster had none of the air of a victorious gamester, and Deirdre's amiability was of a pattern with what he had imagined it the night before. He had heard Davey and Conal ride out at dawn with a cracking of whips and yelping of dogs to wake the saints. That seemed to negative the suggestion that they had been out all night. They were going to muster a couple of hundred of Maitland's cattle in some paddocks near Red Creek, he remembered the Schoolmaster had said.

Yet by the cold light of early morning, he had an unaccountable sensation of having been tricked. What with the girl's smiles and Steve's grog he had not been as wide awake as he had intended to be, he knew. Farrel's readiness to consider the school proposition irritated him. It had been a pretext ; his only anxiety was not to discuss it any more. He was all fret and fume to get back to the Wirree. Nothing would stay him.

When he was up in his high-seated spring-cart, there was none of the complaisant geniality of the night before about him. He gathered up his reins with a sour smile

at the little group assembled on Steve's verandah and drove out of sight at a jolting jog-trot.

"The boys got the mob?" Steve asked anxiously.

The Schoolmaster took off his hat with a sigh.

"Had the time of their lives!" he exclaimed. "It was a big mob—rolling fat."

Deirdre's eyes were still on the track down which McNab had gone to the Wirree.

"I won't say good-bye, Deirdre," he had said, as his eyes rested on her for a moment. "I'll be seein' you again soon."

There had been something in the nature of a promise—or a threat—in his eyes.

"There was no time to fix brands," the Schoolmaster was telling Steve. "Conal's running these with a couple of score of Maitland's store beasts. Drafted out about fifty calves, clear skins and a couple of dozen cows, put them into the Narrow Valley run—wants to do some branding when he gets back. I thought he ought to let them go with the half-dozen scrubbers turned back to the bush, but he wouldn't have it; says he can take them along, branded, with Maitland's next bunch."

"It's a bit risky leavin' them there."

Steve's glance wandered in the direction of the valley lying to the westward between the last line of hills that shut the shanty in from the long roll of inland plains.

"It's a bit risky," he repeated. "But Conal knows his business. It'll be all right, I suppose. There's nobody goes Narrow Valley way but Cameron's men, and they're not likely to be going this time of the year—seeing the rains are due. Conal had a look at the fences when he was up a couple of days ago, didn't he? Though fences aren't much good. Seen a wild cow fly like a bird when she wants to. Good thing Conal got away

before the rains, Dan. If the rivers were down he'd never've got through."

"Yes," said the Schoolmaster. "It was a case of now or never."

"And, after all," he added gravely, putting his arm out and drawing her to him, "it was Deirdre saved the situation. But I wouldn't have you do what you did again, dear, not for all the cattle in the world, nor all the money in it."

She clung to him.

"And I wouldn't do it," she sobbed, breathlessly.

CHAPTER XXXIII

It was nearly two months before Conal and Davey were back in the Wirree again.

They rode into the township one evening when the sun was sinking behind the purple range of the hills and making a rosy mist of the dust a mob of northern cattle raised.

Dust-grimed and silent, their whips curled on their arms, their dogs lean and limping at heel, they passed McNab's. They might have been any of a dozen cattlemen who were about the sale-yards that day; but McNab recognised them.

It was those cattle of Maitland's that stood between him and his suspicions of the game Conal and the Schoolmaster were on. He thought he knew the part they played in it, but itched for a straw of proof. He hurried to the doorway and stood in it, chewing his underlip, as he watched the road-weary, weedy beasts and their drovers trail out of the town.

Conal saw him.

"Pullin' 'em up and comin' back for a drink in a minute, McNab," he yelled.

He lost no chances of letting Thad think there was nothing to hide in his movements. He returned to the Black Bull a few moments later, and Davey went on to Hegarty's.

Teddy, Steve's black boy, and the dogs, watched the cattle on the edge of the road.

Conal and Davey spent few words on each other.

They went their separate ways by mutual consent, avoiding the occasions that mean association or talking.

On the road during the first days, when the cattle were fresh, they had swung their stock-whips, keeping the mob going, like one man. There had been headlong gallops after breakaways, the thrashing-in of stragglers, the crowding of beasts up steep, slippery hillsides with curses and yelping dogs, the watchfulness that driving a mob of wild cattle short-handed meant; nerves and muscles were stretched to the job in hand.

When a halt was made the first night, the mob was ringed with brushwood fires. The wildest of the scrub-bred warrigals, broken by the long day's steady trotting, hustled up quietly against Maitland's well-fattened store beasts. Conal and the black boy took the first watch, Davey and Conal the second, and Davey and the black the third.

Ordinarily the fires flaring against the darkness were enough to keep the cattle in a bunch during the night. Sometimes when a fire died down and there was a longer gap in the links between the fires, a restless heifer or steer made a dash for it, and the watcher had to be quick with a burning bough, brandish and whack it about the head of the runaway before the beast with a moaning bellow and roar turned back to the mob again.

It was on the second night out when Conal was sleeping and Davey and Teddy watching, that the black, stupid with sleep, let his fires go down, and a red bull and half a dozen cows broke through the ring. It looked like a stampede. Davey dashed after the bull. Conal's dog, Sally, alert at the first rush of the cattle's movement, leapt after them. Her long, yellow shape flashed like a streak of lightning in the wan light over the plains. She raced level with the leader's sleek shoulder and laid her teeth in his hide, wheeled him, snapping at his nose and dragging him by it, until he turned in toward the

mob again. Davey lashed the cows after the leader. Sally flew round them, a yellow fury, yelping and snapping. Conal, half-asleep, flung on to his horse, and laid about him with his whip, cursing. He and the black boy had all their work cut out to keep the mob steady.

It was a near thing, and Conal used his tongue pretty freely when he talked of it. He had had very little to say to Davey, ordinarily. The memory of that evening in the kitchen at Steve's rankled. It bred a sense of resentment and secret antagonism which he took less pains to hide, from that night. He used his lungs to curse Teddy and the red steer, but did not talk to Davey unless he had something to say about the cattle or the road. From dawn till sunset they rode silently within a dozen yards of each other.

When they came within easy distance of Rane and the lake settlements they kept the mob moving all night. The Snowy was swollen with recent rains when they came to it; but Conal had set his mind on crossing without delay.

He rushed the mob down the incline to the river, and drove it into the swirling stream. Whip thongs swung together ripped and racked in the clear air. The struggling, terrified beasts were crowded, with no more than their heads above water, against the strong currents of the stream until, with rattling and clashing horns, they clambered up the bank on the further side.

The last days on the road were taken more easily. The mob went slowly eastward, grazing as it moved, and was in prime condition when Conal handed it over to Maitland in Cooburra, on the New South Wales side. Maitland was a big man in the district, head of the well-known firm of stock dealers; no difficulties were made about the turn-over. When Conal had had some talk with him, and Davey and he had loafed about the town for a day or two, they went out again with half a hundred poor beasts from a drought-stricken Western run.

On the road behind the mob, despite their secret resentment, Long Conal and Davey Cameron had come to the dumb understanding of road mates. It did nothing to break the silence between them. Davey yielded Conal an unconscious homage. He did it with grudging humility; but there was no breaking the barrier of Conal's reserve. Notwithstanding his blithe recklessness, his daring and bragging enthusiasm, there was a stern quality, an unplumbed depth in Conal. He endured Davey's company, but there was that in his mind against him which one man does not easily forgive another. As they drew nearer Wirreeford, and the thoughts of each took the same track, the latent animosity vibrated between them again.

Conal lost no time in getting out of the township and taking the road to the hills. Davey, conscious that it was Conal, and not he, who would stand well in the eyes of Deirdre and the Schoolmaster when the story of the road was told, lingered at Hegarty's.

A brooding bitterness possessed him. He knew that Conal had wanted him until this deal was fixed up, not only because he was short of a man when Pat and Tim Kearney cleared out, but because he was afraid how he, Davey, might use the knowledge he had told the Schoolmaster he possessed about some other of Conal's cattle dealings. As for himself, Davey knew that not only had his independence demanded a job, but something of the spirit of adventure, a recklessness of consequences, had appealed to him in the moonlighting of a couple of hundred scrub cattle.

He wondered what he would do when the Schoolmaster and Conal and Deirdre left the hills. He knew that a share of the money the cattle had brought would be his. He thought that he would go away from the South when he got it, and strike out in some new line of life for himself.

CHAPTER XXXIV

DAVEY was on his way to Steve's when he saw that the wooden church with a zinc roof, which had just been built in Wirreeford, was lighted, and that people were going into it.

It was early evening, the sky clear above the sharp outlines of the building, a few stars quivering in the limpid twilight.

Davey pulled up his horse to stare at the church. The place had been building a long while. This was the first time he had seen it up and finished.

In the paddock beside it was his father's carry-all, and the grey horse beside it was Bessie, old Lass's daughter. A vague heart pain caught his breath. The wind brought the strain of a plaintive hymn. They must be inside, his mother and father, he told himself. He got off his horse and led her into the deep shadow the paling fence threw. A longing to see them seized him. He stood there trying to hear their voices.

After a moment he thought he could hear his mother's voice, frail and sweet, in the singing. He remembered how she had sung to him once, how she had sung over her spinning wheel and the quaint little song it was. The tune of it went flying through his brain with the tap-tap of the spinning wheel. How gay and dear her voice had been. He remembered how he used to love as a child to sit clutching at her dress when she sang like that. And the old man! In that moment of loneliness he forgot the hard speaking and bitterness there

had been between him and his father. A wave of tenderness overwhelmed him. Pride and a longing for their love struggled in him with a physical hurt beyond endurance.

He determined to stand there and wait to see them come out of church.

Friday night services after the cattle sales were an institution as new as the church. They had been organised so that christenings, marriages, and some soul-saving into the bargain, might be done while the hill folk were down for the sales. McNab had done his best to move the parson who had accepted the Wirree as his cure of souls, but the young man stuck like a limpet, and there was no telling, the gossips said, how moral and church-going he might not make Wirreeford before he was done with it.

Davey waited and watched.

When the people came filing out of the doorway, he edged along the fence so that he could see their faces as they passed under the flare of an oil-can over the door.

There were not many of them, two or three women and children, and an old man or two. They gathered and were talking about the gateway when Mary Cameron came out.

Davey saw her face under the light for a moment. There was a shine of tears on her cheeks. Her figure, in the grey dress he knew so well, seemed thinner than it used to be. Her little straw bonnet was pressed down close on her head, her shawl drawn over her shoulders. She hurried from the church door without speaking to anyone. He saw her hand flutter out to the post by the door as she felt for the step.

"She's been crying and saying her prayers for me," he told himself with pain and self-reproach.

He waited to see Donald Cameron come from the church and join her.

A girl—a fair-haired girl—detached herself from the little gathering about the gate and went towards her.

"Oh, there you are, Mrs. Cameron, dear," she said. "I was waiting to help you put Bess in!"

Davey knew her voice. It was Jessie Ross. His heart gave a throb of gratitude.

The young parson came out and slammed the church door behind him.

Davey's glance flew to the paddock. He could see his mother's grey-clad figure moving about among the vehicles and the horses.

"The old man's not with her. She's harnessing up herself," he thought. "Where is he, I wonder? She wouldn't have come down alone."

He saw the heavy buggy, his mother sitting erect in it, go out along the road. He followed at a little distance.

The buggy halted before the Black Bull.

A dozen horses, dogs lying limp and silent at their heels, were tethered to the posts before it. The bar was open and noisy with men drinking. They were gathered about its narrow benches like flies. From the gaping doors a garish light fell. But it was out of range of the light that Mary Cameron had drawn up her horse. She sat very still. The outlines of the vehicle were ruled black against the starlight which rested wanly on her figure and on the sturdy, grey horse.

"What on earth is she waiting for?" Davey asked himself.

He was going to her when the side-door of the Black Bull—the door of McNab's parlour, as he knew—opened. Donald Cameron stood in it for a moment.

Davey saw McNab behind him, his crooked figure and twisted face with the withered fringe of hair about it.

Cameron staggered across the stretch of gravel to the buggy in which his wife sat waiting. He climbed into it.

"Will you not let me drive, Donald?"

The clear sweetness of his mother's voice came to the boy's ears.

"No," Donald Cameron said unsteadily. "There's no woman living will drive me while I can lay hands on the reins."

The four-wheeler moved away over the long winding road to the hills.

Davey was stupefied.

"So McNab's got him," he muttered, glancing at the ramshackle shanty. The sign-board of the Black Bull, with red eyes on its dingy white ground, was just visible. The glare from the bar lighted it.

"That's why she goes to church alone. The old man's drinking," he thought.

He turned to look after the buggy. It was bumping and jolting over the ruts and barking the road-side. Davey held his breath; he saw the mare buck and then take the log culvert over the creek two or three hundred yards from McNab's.

"He's not fit to drive," he told himself, and swinging into his saddle, set off down the road. "He'll turn the wheel on a log, or drive off the road. She knows. That's why she wanted to drive."

He followed at a little distance all the way through the hills. Sometimes he heard his mother's voice, patient and yet edged with a weariness and despair, exclaiming: "Mind there's a bad rut to the left!" or "You're driving too near the edge of the road, Donald!"

But steadily, without reference to either of them, the little horse kept to the track. Davey followed them all

the way home, to the very gates of the house in which he was born. Then he turned back into the shade of the trees again. Once his mother had looked round and seen the watchful horseman. She had not been near enough to see his face. He rode in the shadows. But he had seen her face and it was a revelation to him.

A woman must have a good deal of courage to drive beside a drunken man in the hills at night, he knew. The look on her face hurt him. There were death gaps at a dozen places on the road; and Donald Cameron was as stubborn as a mule. Neither the mare, nor his wife, could have saved him if he had taken it into his head to drive in any given direction. Davey wondered how often his mother had driven like this before. He vowed that she would never do it again—if he could help it.

CHAPTER XXXV

AFTER the sales on the following Friday, when the dust of the yards was heavy in the air, and the stock horses stood in irregular, drooping lines outside the Black Bull and Mrs. Mary Ann Hegarty's, Davey made his way to where on an open space of land the church had been built. Wirreeford had out its lights—garish oil flares and rush candles—and the little fires lighted before the doors of the houses to keep off sand flies and mosquitoes, smouldered in the dusk, sending up wreaths of blue smoke.

He had made up his mind as to what he was going to do. During the week Conal had been mustering and branding the cows and calves drafted from the scrub mob. Davey had worked with him, and many of the calves he had scarred with Maitland's double M. were the progeny of his father's cattle. Half a dozen cows bore the D.C. brand under their thick hair. Conal had wanted to pay him off. He had told Davey that there was no need for him to burn his fingers with this business, and that he could run the mob to the border, or to Melbourne, across the swamp, if the south-eastern rivers were down; but he was short-handed, Davey knew; a sense of obligation urged him to stick to Conal until the whole of the mob they had moonlighted together was disposed of.

Conal had insisted on getting the cows and calves into a half-timbered paddock below Steve's, the day before, and had run a hundred of Maitland's fattened beasts

with them. He meant to make a start and have the mob on the roads early next morning.

There was a race-meeting in the long paddock behind McNab's that Friday.

Conal and he had come into the Wirree to show themselves before starting off on their overland journey. Almost every man in the countryside was there.

Davey wondered why the Schoolmaster had not come down to the township with Conal and himself. He had been a different man since their return, very silent, scarcely stirring from his chair in the back room, while Deirdre hovered, never very far from him, anxious and protective as a mother-bird.

She had not told him what had happened while Conal and he were away—how the Schoolmaster had said to her one day, suddenly :

“It's very dark, Deirdre. Is there going to be a storm ? ”

The sunshine was blank and golden out of doors.

“No,” she had said, laughing. “There's not a sign of one.”

“Where are you ? ” he asked, his voice strange and strained.

“Why, I'm here just beside you,” she replied.

He put out his hands.

“I can't see you,” he said. “It's the dark, Deirdre ! My God . . . it's the dark.”

For a long time he had sat staring while she knelt beside him, crying, murmuring eagerly and tenderly, trying to soothe and to comfort him. But from that time the dimming and obliterating of the whole world had begun for him.

The heavy darkness had passed. It was not all night yet, but a misty twilight. He had forbidden her to speak of it, so that Davey did not know. Conal and Steve had guessed, but Davey's mind, busy with its own

problems, was slower to realise what was going on about him. It had roused every loyal and fighting instinct in him to see his mother with that look of suffering on her face ; his father in the way of becoming McNab's prey—losing all that he had gained through years of toil and harsh integrity by falling into the pigs' trough McNab had set for him.

It was that stern righteousness of his, his sober, stolid virtue, which had given Cameron the place in the respect and grudging homage of the countryside that his wealth and property alone would not have won for him ; they had cloaked even his meanness with a sombre dignity and brought him the half-jesting title of the Laird of Ayrmuir.

Davey led his horse into the paddock beside the church where the vehicles which had brought the hill folk to the township were standing. The horses out of the shafts, their heavy harness still on their backs, were feeding, tethered to the fence, or to the wheels of the carts and buggies.

He stood beside the high, old-fashioned buggy that had brought Mary and Donald Cameron to Wirreeford. He rubbed his hand along Bessie's long coffin-box of a nose, and told her on a drifting stream of thought that he had decided to go home, to ask his father to forgive him, and that he meant to try to get on with him again. Her attitude of attention and affection comforted him.

The people began to come from the church. They stood in groups by the doorway talking to each other. One or two men came into the paddock to harness-up for the home journey. Davey put the mare into her shafts. He was fastening the traces when Mary Cameron came round the back of the buggy. A catch of her breath told that she had seen him.

“ Davey ! ” she cried.

He saw her face, the light of her eyes.

"Mother!" he sobbed.

His arms went round her, and his face with the rough beard—such a man's face it had become since it last brushed her's—was crushed against her cheek.

"I'm coming home," he said, his voice breaking. "Not now, not to-night, but in a little while. I'll ask the old man to forgive me and see if we can't get along better."

"Davey! Davey!" she cried softly, looking into his face, a new joy in her own. "Oh, but they are sad days, these! Have you heard what they are saying of your father? They tell me that you have been over the ranges."

"Yes," Davey said. She scarcely recognised his voice. "It's because of father—because of what they're saying—I'm coming home. I won't have them say it . . . after all he's done . . . do you think I'm going to let him lose it, if I can help it."

There was a passionate vibration in his voice.

"How did it happen? I saw you on Friday and followed you home."

"Oh, my boy!" Her hand trembled on his shoulders. "It was you then? What's come to your father I don't know at all. He's not the same man he used to be. It's that man at the Black Bull. He's got hold of him—I don't know how . . . but he's been drinking there often now, and he never used to be a drinking man—your father. I think it was his disappointment with you at first . . . I'm not blaming you, Davey. It wasn't to be expected you'd do anything but what you did. I'm not blaming you. But there were the long evenings by ourselves, after you'd gone. He sat eating his heart out about it before the fire, and I couldn't say a word. He was thinking of you all the

time—but his pride wouldn't let him speak. He was seeing the ruin of his hopes for you. He meant you to be a great man in the district. Then McNab began talking to him. Your father thinks McNab's doing him a good turn in some way, but I feel it's nothing but evil will come to us from him. The sight of the man makes me shiver and I wonder what harm it is he is planning for us."

Her voice went to Davey's heart.

"I know, mother," he said. "But it'll be all right soon. The old man'll pull up when I come home. I'll tell him I mean to be all he wants me to be. I was a fool before, though I don't think I could go on in the old way even now. But he'll be reasonable if I go the right way about asking him. I've a deal more sense than I had. I've sobered down a lot . . . can see things straighter. I won't be having any dealings with McNab again—and I'll get father to cut him. The pair of us'll be more than equal to him. But I've got to finish my job with Conal first . . . it wouldn't be playing the game to leave him just now."

"Is it Conal you've been working with, Davey?" her eyes went up to his anxiously.

"Yes," he said.

"Your father's been talking a lot about this work of Conal's," she went on, a troubled line in her forehead. "He says the Schoolmaster's in it too. McNab's been talking to him about it, and they mean to interfere in some way. He's talked a good deal about it when he didn't know he was talking, driving home in the evenings. But McNab's making a fool of him for his own purposes, and to do harm to Mr. Farrel, I think. I was trying to tell your father that, but he wouldn't hear me. Oh, why have you got yourself mixed up with duffing and crooked ways, Davey?"

"What did he say?" Davey asked.

"I don't remember all of it." She swept her brow with a little weary gesture. "It was all mumbling and muttering, and I couldn't hear half what he said—but it was to do with cattle. And to-day McNab came over to the yards as soon as we arrived and I heard him say: 'I've got word where there's a mob with brands won't bear lookin' into, to-night. I'll tell M'Laughlin, and he'll get a couple of men to work with him. If you'll come round to the parlour we can fix up what's to be done.'"

Davey jerked his horse's bridle, pulling him round to mount.

"I meant to take you home myself to-night, mother," he said. "But I'll have to find Conal and tell him this. There's no time to lose."

"I'll be all right, Davey," she said tremulously. "I'll go and wait for your father at McNab's. He's there now. And we're quite safe with Bess taking us home. She knows every inch of the way."

Davey kissed her hurriedly.

He turned out of the church paddock towards Hegarty's. There was a dance in full swing, and he thought that Conal might be there. But although a new fiddler was in his element and most of the young people in the district jigging, Conal was not. He went back along the road to McNab's.

Outside, in the buggy, Mary Cameron was sitting. She turned and smiled when he rode up to her. Her face had a shy happiness, but the patience and humility of her waiting attitude infuriated him.

He swung off his horse and opened the door of McNab's side parlour.

Cameron was sitting at the small, uneven table, a bottle of rum and glasses before him. McNab on the

other side of the table, leaning across it was talking to him, his voice running glibly. The light of an oil lamp on the table between them showed his yellow, eager eyes, the scheming intensity of the brain behind them, the lurking half-smile of triumph about his writhing, colourless lips. M'Laughlin, leaning lazily back in his chair, his long legs stretched under the table, sat watching and listening to him.

McNab sprang to his feet with an oath when he saw Davey in the doorway.

"Mother's waiting for you outside," he said, lifting Donald Cameron by the elbows and leading him to the door.

He turned on McNab with his back to it.

"I'll be looking after my father's affairs from this out," he said. "And you remember what I promised you if you interfered with me again . . . you'll get it sure as I live."

He slammed the door.

Donald Cameron, stupid with McNab's heavy spirits, was unprepared for this masterful young man whose rage was burning to a white heat. He went with him as quietly as a child.

Davey helped him into the buggy.

"Keep him away from McNab," he said to his mother, "and I'll be home as soon as I can."

She smiled, the shy, happy smile of a girl, nodded to him, and they drove off.

Davey went back into the bar of the Black Bull, with its crowd of stockmen, drovers, shop-keepers and sale-yard loungers.

"Where's Conal?" he asked. "Does anybody know if he's left the town yet?"

There was a roar of laughter.

"He was looking for you an hour ago, Davey," a

drunken youngster yelled gaily. "Was in here, 'n McNab gave him a turn about the Schoolmaster's girl——"

"McNab was tellin' him you'd made-up to marry her. You should have heard Conal go off," somebody shouted.

"Where is he?" There was a sharpness about Young Davey's question that nobody liked.

"Who? McNab?"

"No, Conal!"

McNab had come into the bar and was standing watching him, his face livid.

"Round somewhere lookin' for your blood," the same jovial youngster, who had first spoken, cried.

"Seen him go up towards the store a while ago, Davey," Salt Watson said slowly.

No one smelt mischief brewing quicker than he. He had seen McNab's face. He knew Young Davey's temper and the sort of man he was growing. He knew Conal, too, and that no love was lost between them. It was an urgent matter would send Davey looking through the town for Conal that way, he guessed, and knowing something of the business they had in hand, as an old roadster always does, imagined the cause of the urgency.

McNab looked as if Davey's anxiety to find Conal had taught him something too.

Davey flung out of the bar. He straddled his horse again and went flying off down the road to the store.

Conal was not there. Someone said he had been, and set out for the hills an hour earlier. Davey made off down the road again, doubling on his track, past the Black Bull. He thought that he would catch up to Conal on the road, and that they would be back at Steve's before M'Laughlin and his men were out of Wirreeford.

The culvert over the creek that he had watched Bess shy at and take in her own leisurely fashion a week

before, was not half a mile from the outskirts of the township. The creek banks on either side were fringed with wattles and light-woods. As the mare rattled across it there was a whistling crack in the air. Davey pitched on her neck. Terrified, she leapt forward. He clung to her, swaying for a while, yet never losing his grip.

He knew that someone had shot him from the trees by the culvert. There was a sharp pain in his breast; blood welled from it.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE little red horse's pace was as swift as a swallow's. Sure-footed, she flashed on over the long winding roads, up the steep hillsides and down them, slipping and sliding on the loose shingles, but keeping her knees in the cunning way that only the mountain horses know. Davey heard the beat of her hoofs until the sound became mechanical. Though she was moving, she seemed to get no further—to throw no distance behind her, forging ahead through the darkness.

Fear and a suffocating weakness began to dull his brain. He could not see. The sagging pain in his breast ate up his strength. With a desperate effort he pulled the handkerchief from his throat and thrust it inside his shirt against the wound. He dug his heels into Red's side, urging her on.

A diffused glow of lights loomed before him. As if awakening from a nightmare in which he had been struggling to get forward and was held back by mysterious, unknown forces, he realised that they were the lights of the shanty.

The mare carried him on into the stable yard. The welcome yelp of dogs greeted his ears. He flung off her, staggered across the yard and burst open the back door. He was conscious of Farrel and Deirdre springing towards him, of Steve behind them. Then surging darkness, the swirling tides of dreamless darkness that had been pressing close to him all the way, closed over him. For a moment he struggled against them, trying to speak.

A few muttered, incoherent words were all Deirdre and the Schoolmaster caught.

He pitched forward.

Deirdre ran to him. The Schoolmaster helped her to lift Davey over on his back. She moistened his lips with the spirit that Steve brought quickly.

"There's blood on him, father," she cried. There was no tremor in her voice, only a tense anxiety.

Farrel told her what to do, to cut away Davey's shirt where the blood oozed on it. Steve went for water and rags as she did so. The flickering light of the candle the Schoolmaster held, showed the broken and blackened flesh.

"He's been shot . . . it's a slug made that mark," Steve gasped when he saw it.

When he had put a basin of cold water beside her, she laid soaked rags on the wound. The shock brought Davey a moment of consciousness. He moaned, stirring with pain. His eyes opened. He saw Deirdre's face above his and the Schoolmaster bending over him.

He stared at them unseeingly. Then the mists cleared from his brain. "I'm all right," he muttered, "all right. . . ."

He lay quite still.

"Have you got the calves out of the paddock?" he asked a moment later, his voice stronger. "M'Laughlin and a couple of men 'll be here presently. McNab's got wind of their being in the paddock, here. Get them out to the valley quick, or let them go."

"Where's Conal?" Steve asked eagerly; "he ought to be in by now."

There was a crooked furrow of pain on Davey's face.

"I looked for him before I came out," he said. "Couldn't find him—thought he must have gone on ahead. I got this," his hand went to his breast, "crossing

the culvert over the creek. They said at McNab's, Conal had been swearing—to do for me—but I didn't believe it”

His body sagged and his head went back ; but Deirdre was behind him ; she rested his head on her knees.

Her eyes flew to the Schoolmaster.

“ It was Conal,” she breathed. “ He said he would do it.”

Farrel's face whitened. He put no man before Long Conal.

Deirdre put a pack of wet rags over the wound again, and bound it on with a piece of unbleached linen.

Her eyes went anxiously to Steve.

“ He's not going to die, is he ? ” she asked.

“ No,” Steve muttered, cheerfully. His eyes travelled the length of the boy's sturdy frame. “ It's not much more than a surface wound, though it's cut up the flesh a good deal. He'd look different if he was goin' to kick the bucket.”

“ If we could lift him into the other room it would be better,” she suggested. “ The men from the Wirree may be coming.”

“ Yes,” the Schoolmaster said.

As they tried to move him, Davey regained consciousness.

“ Have you got those beasts out ? ” he asked querulously. “ There's no time to lose. I'm all right.”

Deirdre on one side, the Schoolmaster on the other, they led him to the room in which Farrel slept. He sank wearily on the bunk against the wall.

The Schoolmaster went back to the kitchen for a moment.

Deirdre bent over the bunk, gazing at Davey's still face anxiously, intently. It was no time for weeping or exclamation. She realised the danger that threatened.

If M'Laughlin and the men from the Wirree came and found the cattle in the paddock below Steve's, not only Davey, but also the Schoolmaster would have to pay the penalty.

She went back to the kitchen.

"He's sleeping," she said.

The Schoolmaster and Steve were standing by the door arguing in an undertone together.

The Schoolmaster turned to go out.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Let those animals out," he said briefly. "It's no good. Teddy won't go with them alone. He's as afraid of the dark as they are. And if M'Laughlin's coming we've got to get them out of the way."

"He's going to try and take them himself to the valley, and it's madness—he can't see," cried Steve.

"Conal was a fool to bring them near the place. I told him this morning, but he'll take his own way and nobody else's," the Schoolmaster replied. "If he were here now——"

"I'm going to take them, father," Deirdre said. "They're easy enough to drive at night and Teddy'll work with me. You watch Davey. He'll be right now, but in case— Besides the place has got to look peaceable and ordinary if M'Laughlin comes."

"I can't let you do it, Deirdre."

The Schoolmaster's voice was harsh and peremptory.

"I'm going to!"

He recognised his own spirit in her.

"There's no time to lose," she said, "and I know the track to the Valley. Conal showed it to me—I helped him to bring in the calves yesterday, and I haven't been on the roads with you both for the last year without knowing how to manage a handful of old cows."

"I tell you, I'll not have it," the Schoolmaster interrupted passionately.

"It means as much to me as to any of you," she said, a little breathless sob in her voice. "You don't know how much. You can't have these beasts with the new brands running the hills now. Conal ought to be responsible for them, but that won't help us much if they're found here. Davey's known to have been working with him—and you were suspected of being with him even when you weren't!"

The door slammed behind her.

Steve followed her out of doors.

He pulled the chestnut's girths when she had thrown a saddle across his back.

"You can manage the calves, of course, Deirdre," he said. "Keep 'm quiet as you can. No shouting, mind. The dogs know night work with cattle's mostly quiet work—keep 'm back. You'll not be raising a whip yourself. I'll tell Teddy, the less crackin' the better. These beasts'll go quiet enough."

He and the Schoolmaster watched her flying out across the faintly moonlit paddocks. The dogs were soon working round the mob in a far corner where the fence panels were down. Deirdre drove them through the opening. The black boy was on the road waiting to keep the beasts' noses northwards with an adroit flick of his whip. It was with an occasional lowing and rattling of horns, the brush and rattle of hoofs on the dry timber that they passed out into the shadows of the road.

The Schoolmaster had no fear that Deirdre could not manage this handful of yearlings and old cows. She had chased calves from paddock to paddock when she was big enough to straddle a pot-bellied pony, and had cracked a light whip which Conal had made for her,

with a fall a couple of inches shorter than his own, round many a restless herd when Conal and he were droving and she was on the roads with them. It was the bitterness of not being able to drive himself that plagued Farrel: the consciousness of having to stand by and let her do what there was danger in doing, incensed him. Steve watched the road for sound or sign of men and horses from Wirreeford. Then he chased his own two milkers up from the cow paddock and ran them backwards and forwards along the road where the mob had passed, to obliterate its tracks.

A weight was off the Schoolmaster's mind when Steve said that Deirdre and the black were out of sight. He knew that by taking the cattle along the narrow tracks on the ledges of the hills, she would save them. Narrow Valley scrubs would screen them from curious eyes. If M'Laughlin came, the road would tell no tales. Steve's cows had made it look as if a mob had passed in the opposite direction beyond the shanty, and he and the Schoolmaster had a story to fit the tracks. They did not think that anybody but themselves knew the way under the trees on the Valley hillsides. Only if M'Laughlin brought a tracker would he be able to follow Deirdre.

Farrel wondered how word had reached McNab, and what foolhardiness had led Conal to bring these branded calves to the paddock below Steve's. For a moment the idea that Conal, baited and maddened with drink, might have given some hint at McNab's of the beasts being in Steve's paddock, occurred to him. And then there was Davey. For a while his mind brooded over what had happened to him.

"It was only mad with drink, Conal could have shot at a man in the dark," he told himself. "The open fight is his way." Conal and he had been friends a good many years, and there was something in his estimate

of the man which defied the idea that he had shot Davey. And yet it looked as if he had. Why was he not in? He had left Wirreeford an hour before Davey. Conal was on the road before Davey. And he had been drinking at McNab's. He had been taunted with Deirdre's name,

"It was only mad with drink he could have done it," the Schoolmaster told himself again. And even then a fierce contempt and condemnation surged within him. The memory of Deirdre's fired young womanhood; of the look in her face, of the glow in her eyes, told him what this hurt to Davey meant to her.

Steve watched in the room beside Davey.

His shrunk, crippled limbs ached. His head sank on his breast. He drooped and slept forgetfully. The Schoolmaster strode the length of the kitchen. The fire smouldered low. He threw some wood on it. The crackling flames flashed and played freakishly across the room. He wondered if Conal would come—where he was. The hours passed. There was no sound or sign of late riders from the Wirree. He opened the door of the hut. The night was very still. Only a mopoke called plaintively in the distance.

There was a stir in the room in which Davey was sleeping. Farrel heard Steve's voice in startled and sleepy protest. The door opened, Davey stood on the threshold, his eyes with a delirious brightness in them.

"What have you done about those calves?" he asked, his voice quick and clear.

"We are going to let 'em go," Steve gasped. "You go back and lie down now, Davey."

"You can't do that with the new brands on them," Davey brushed him aside, irritably. "I'm all right now. I can take them to the Valley. It's a bit of luck M'Laughlin hasn't turned up yet. P'raps I upset his calculations—his and McNab's. He's not so fond of gettin' a move

on, Johnny Mac. Might 've guessed I'd got a notion he was going to be busy when I went round asking for Conal. Thought we'd give him the slip anyway and he'd save himself the trouble of coming!" He laughed a little unsteadily. "Think I'll get the calves along to the Valley, all the same."

The Schoolmaster took his arm.

"Go and lie down, Davey," he said. "If you go wandering about like this, you'll bring on the bleeding again. Besides, Deirdre——"

"Where is she?" His eyes flew searching the room for her.

"She"—it seemed difficult to say—"She has gone down to the Valley, so it'll be all right," he said.

Davey turned towards the door.

"Don't be a fool, Davey!" The Schoolmaster intercepted him.

Davey pushed him aside.

He strode into the stable yard as though nothing had happened to disable him. A moment later the Schoolmaster heard the rattle of hoofs on the road.

Every fibre of him shivered at the boy's contempt, the blazing amazement of his eyes. He sank into a chair, covering his face with his hands.

CHAPTER XXXVII

DEIRDRE and the black boy drove their straggling herd into the stock-yard in the narrow bush clearing, walled by trees, an hour or two before dawn.

The stock-yards which Conal had put up at the end of Narrow Valley were invisible to any but those who knew the winding track that led over the brow of the hill and through the heavy timber on the spur, to the old hut at the foot of it. Teddy was pulling the rails of the outeryard into place and Deirdre was going towards the hut, Socks at her heels, his bridle over her arm, when a horseman rode out of the opening into the valley, by which they had come.

She recognised the red horse, but did not know that it was Davey riding till he was almost level, and dropped to his feet. He swayed against the horse's side, clutching his reins.

"It's a shame . . . no one to bring the brutes but you," he said weakly. "I came—soon as I knew."

Deirdre put her arm out to him. They walked slowly towards the hut. Davey became weaker. She drew the horses by their reins behind them, keeping her eyes on him. The ground rocked under his feet.

"We're just there—another minute and it'll be all right," she said, and called Teddy.

He had seen Davey Cameron's red horse coming into the clearing, and ran up to her, chattering with fright at the sight of Davey's limp figure.

"Put the horses up in the shed—leave the saddles on,"

she said quickly. "You go back, tell boss—cows all right—Davey very sick man, here."

Although an hour earlier nothing would have induced the boy to brave the darkness alone, it was not many moments before he was up on his weedy, half-wild nag and streaking away towards the cover of the trees and the thread-like track which wound uphill along the spur.

Deirdre opened the door of the hut. Davey took a step or two into it and fell forward. She set the brushwood on the hearth alight, and threw some broken branches over it to make a blaze. There was no stir in Davey when she knelt beside him, and a pool of blood lay on the floor where he had fallen.

She ran out of doors for water. In the semi-darkness of the hut it was difficult to find anything to put water in, but there was a pannikin near the water barrel and she filled that and tore pieces of calico from her petticoat to bathe his wound.

Groping along the shelves near the fireplace she found the end of a thick rush and tallow candle. She did not light it at first because the fire had sprung up and was lighting the room, showing its meagre equipment, the branding irons and a saddle flung down in a corner, a bunk against the wall with a couple of sheepskins over it, a table with two or three pannikins and a black bottle on it. There was a drain of some spirit in the bottle. She poured it carefully into a pannikin and held it to Davey's lips.

His immobility frightened her. She lit the candle and held it close to his face. Under the leaping yellow flames it had the mask-like stillness and pallor of death.

"Davey! Davey!" she screamed with terror, creeping up beside his heavy, still body.

"Oh, you mustn't die, Davey—you mustn't!" Even as she sobbed she thought he was dead.

She put the spirit on his lips again.

"Oh, I've done all that I can—all that I know to do. Won't you look at me, Davey? My heart's breaking. You've not gone, Davey? You wouldn't leave me. It's me, Deirdre, your sweetheart, that's with you! Won't you look at me? . . . Won't you open your eyes? I can't bear it—if you don't speak to me."

"Davey!" She caught him by the shoulder, shaking him roughly. "I won't let you go! I won't let you die!" she cried.

He fell back from her hands.

She threw herself across him sobbing brokenly. Pressing her face close to his, she leant over him, murmuring and trying to revive him with a breathless agony of grief and tenderness.

"Oh, come back to me! Oh, you will not die. You will not die and leave me," she moaned. "Deirdre, that loves you. Your sweetheart, Davey!"

The cry died away.

In her frenzy she had not heard the door open. Spent with anguish she laid her head against Davey's still one. She felt rather than saw that someone was there in the hut behind her. She turned. Conal was standing in the doorway.

She stared at him. He might have been an apparition, so strange he looked, there in the doorway, with the glimmering night behind him. There was something stricken, aghast, about him. He gazed at her as if the tragic woe of her face were a revelation to him.

"He's dead—and it's you that have killed him, Conal," she said, at length.

"You—love—him, Deirdre?" Conal asked.

So slow and dreary their voices were that they seemed to be talking in their sleep.

"Yes," she said, "and it's my heart that's dead with him."

"I didn't know you felt like that—about him, Deirdre," Conal said, a humble, awkward air about him.

That it was Davey lay there dead did not seem to trouble him. It was of Deirdre he was thinking in a mazed, dazed way, and the thing she had said to him.

"You've done what no woman could forgive you, Conal." A vibrating passion had come to her voice. "I never want to see you again as long as I live."

Conal stared at her a moment; then he swung heavily out of the hut into the yard. He had the gait of a drunken man. She heard him stumble over something in the yard, strike his head against a post. Then the sound of his horse's hoof-beats in the clearing died away.

Deirdre looked down at the still figure beside her. In spite of what she had said she could not believe that Davey was dead—that all that young, strong body would not move again, that Davey's eyes would not open and look at her with the eager, questioning glance she had known. Something of the horror of his stillness had passed; she moistened his lips with the spirit. Putting her arms round him she gathered him up against her, put his head on her bosom and leaned over him, crooning softly, as though he were asleep. She beguiled herself by saying that he was only asleep and would waken presently.

"What a long time it is," she murmured. "Do you remember, Davey dear, the night before father and I went away, and I ran over the paddock to the corner of the road to see you? I was angry you had gone away without wanting to see me, yourself. . . . You kissed me and I kissed you, and I promised to come back and be your sweetheart and we'd be married some day. . . . And the birds laughed. And the red-runners were out by the

road. There was a beautiful sunset, and it got dark soon. You said it was me you loved and not Jessie. Then I went away . . . and it has never been the same since. But it will be . . . when you are well and I can tell you how much I want you to love me again."

She laughed softly.

"Do you remember how we used to go home in the cart from school together, and how we used to trot Lass up the hillsides to make her poor old sides go like bellows, and you showed me how to blow birds' eggs, and Jess said I wasn't a little lady to blow birds' eggs."

Her voice ran on with a brooklike tenderness.

"If you'd come back, we could have all those times again, Davey," she whispered, looking down into his face beneath hers.

Just when there was the faintest shimmer of dawn in the dim windows, a fluttering breath caught her face. She put the spirit to his lips again. So, chafing his hands and calling him, with tearful and eager little cries, she led him as a mother leads a child just learning to walk, from the valley of the shadows.

Davey opened his eyes. They dwelt on her with a deep, serene gaze. She smiled and went on crooning to him, half singing, half sighing that beguiling little melody of tenderness and entreaty. Warmth came back to him. His breath fell regularly and sweetly. Deirdre took the sheepskins out of the bunk and put them under him on the floor.

He slept. A faint smile on his mouth, his hand sought hers, the fingers curled round it. She sat watching him, a mist of awe and joy and thankfulness gathering in her eyes, because it seemed to her that a miracle had been accomplished that night in Narrow Valley hut.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

WHEN the broad glare of the morning sun broke through the dingy windows of the hut, Deirdre started from the cramped position in which she had fallen, her head leaning wearily against a box.

She was aghast to find that she had been asleep. As she woke with a startled exclamation, a hand went out to her. Her eyes met Davey's.

It was as if that encounter in the valley of shadows had brushed all misunderstandings from the love that was like the sun between them. Deirdre had wrestled with death for possession of him. Her eyes still bore the shadow of the conflict. Davey was wan and vanquished. He knew that she had wrested his spirit from the darkness on which it had been drifting, and the knowledge made a serene joyousness in him.

Speech deserted them ; they had no voices to talk with. Just this gazing of eyes on eyes told all that there was to tell.

Later on she went from his side and began to move about the hut, gathering the brushwood into the hearth, raking over the ashes and making the fire again. His eyes followed her.

The hut was shabby and disorderly by daylight. Conal had used it when he was mustering, and there was a heap of rusty irons in the corner, a few hoarded tins and half-empty jars of grease on the shelves, some old clothes, worn-out boots and green-hide thongs behind the door. The bunk, with its sheepskins, and a table made

of a rough hewn plank on three poles set in the floor, were the only furniture. Deirdre found a bundle of rags on the shelf near the hearth, and searched for the bottle of liniment which she knew was kept for use if any of the men got a broken hand or a kick from a beast in the stock-yards.

Davey knew where Conal had stowed these things while they were working there together. He tried to help Deirdre to find them. She was at his side in an instant.

"You mustn't move," she said, a compelling tenderness in her voice.

He fell back.

The touch of her hands was a shock of joy. His face turned up to her, wan with weakness, radiant at her near presence. His eyes went through hers.

"Deirdre!"

The cry was a prayer also.

She bent over him; her arms encircled him. From that first kiss of conscious lovers she withdrew a little tremulously.

"Oh, you must be still," she cried. "If the bleeding begins again you'll never be strong. You must lie quiet now, and I'll see if I can find some food. There's sure to be flour and some oatmeal about."

"On the shelf in the corner by the hearth," Davey said. "And there was tea in a tin there a day or two ago."

She found them and they breakfasted on a weak gruel and tea without milk. She had helped Davey on to the bunk against the wall and spread the sheepskins under him when the Schoolmaster and Teddy came into the yard. Farrel carried a bag of food and a couple of blankets strapped to his saddle.

Deirdre met him out of doors. The sight of her

reassured him. She told him what had happened during the night—of Davey's long stillness and insensibility, and of Conal's coming a few hours before the dawn.

The Schoolmaster went into the hut.

"Father says"—Deirdre went straight to Davey—"he doesn't believe it was Conal fired that shot at you."

Her eyes went out to him troubled and beseeching.

"I can't help thinking it was, myself, though I'd be glad not to. He's been such a big brotherly sort of man to me always, Conal, and it hurts to think he could do a thing like that."

She continued after a moment.

"Father says, Conal came in after you'd gone last night. He'd been drinking, but his voice told him that he didn't do it. As soon as he knew you'd come after me, the way you were, he rode out after you for fear you mightn't have been able to reach here. Do—do you think it was Conal, Davey?"

Davey turned his face to the wall. He could not bear to hear her defence of Conal—her solicitude and desire to think well of him in spite of everything. He had no doubt in his own mind. The memory of that whistling shot from the dark trees, the agony of his long ride through the hills, came back to him.

"All I know," he said bitterly, "is that I was looking for him before I left the town to tell him what mother had told me about the raid McNab and the old man and McLaughlin were getting up. At the Black Bull they said they'd been baiting Conal—about me—and he'd gone out looking for me—promising to do for me. Some one said he'd gone to the store. I went there and Joe Wilson told me he'd seen Conal riding out an hour earlier. I thought I'd catch him up on the road. It was from the trees by the creek the shot came, and Red took fright."

"There's nobody else got a grudge against you, Davey?"

"Not that I know who'd want to settle me that way. McNab, of course, hasn't got any love for me."

"You went up to the store and straight out along the road past the Bull?" the Schoolmaster asked.

"Yes, but I'd seen McNab in the bar a couple of minutes before. It couldn't have been him."

Farrel threw out his hand with a gesture of doubt and disappointment.

"Deirdre says she's heard Conal say that he'd do for you, Davey," he said, "but she didn't think he meant it. Just his hot-headed way of talking! McNab must have maddened him, filled him up with drink. I can't tell you how it goes against the grain to believe he could have done a thing like this, and yet—it looks like it."

"Was he back when you came away this morning?" Deirdre asked.

"No," the Schoolmaster replied.

"Ask him when he comes in, whether he did, or did not fire at Davey," she said. "I'll take his word. Will you, Davey?"

"Yes." Davey's tone was a little uncertain.

The Schoolmaster went to the door again.

Davey called him back with a restless movement.

"What are you going to do about those beasts?" he asked querulously. "They're better here than at Steve's, but of course if M'Laughlin gets a tracker it wouldn't take him long to find them. Teddy's got them in the four-mile paddock this morning, but they ought to be moving."

"Perhaps Conal"—the Schoolmaster began.

"Oh, yes, I forgot, Conal—he'll take them."

Davey fell back.

"Why can't you take them yourself?" he inquired.

The Schoolmaster met his eyes for a moment.

"Lost my nerve," he said, with a little grating laugh, and turned out of doors.

Deirdre's eyes sparkled with anger.

"Oh," she gasped, breathlessly, "how dare you, Davey? How dare you?"

Davey, morose anger in his eyes, stared at her.

"You're angry because he let me go out last night," she said. "Don't you know he's almost helpless, that he can just see dimly in the broad daylight. All the world's going dark to him, and it's breaking his heart—eating the strength and the soul and the courage out of him, to stand by and let others do things for him."

Consciousness of what he had done came slowly to Davey.

"Oh, it was mean and cruel and cowardly to hurt him like that!" Deirdre cried passionately, and ran out into the sunshine after her father.

When she came back into the hut Davey, with a tense white face, was standing near the door.

"I ought to be flayed alive—but I didn't know, I didn't understand," he said.

There was no quieting or comforting him.

"Will he ever forgive me? Do you think he will, Deirdre?" His face was clammy with the sweat of weakness. "It was more than Conal did—that. Conal wouldn't have done it."

Deirdre went for the Schoolmaster. He came into the hut again. He and Davey gripped hands. Then the Schoolmaster led him to the bunk again and stretched him out on it.

"It's all right, my boy! All right!" he said, brokenly. "You lie still now and let Deirdre look after you."

Davey's vigorous youth rebelled at the days of idleness which followed. The wound knitted quickly; his weakness vanished as it mended.

Conal had disappeared. No one had seen or heard of him since the night of the Wirree races. The Schoolmaster and Deirdre had accepted his disappearance as silent proof of his having fired the shot that had almost cost Davey his life.

When they went back to the shanty Steve talked incessantly about Conal. Although no more had been heard of M'Laughlin and the threatened raid had never been made, he was not easy about that half hundred head of newly-branded beasts in the Narrow Valley paddock.

At the end of the week Davey took the bit between his teeth.

"I'm going to take that mob to the Melbourne yards," he said. "We can't run them any longer in the Valley."

"It's too risky, Davey," the Schoolmaster said. "McNab's too quiet to be harmless, and there's only one man could run the mob with safety."

"And that's Conal?" Davey asked.

"There's not a man in the country like Conal with cattle. He knows every by-path and siding on the ranges. Then he's hail-fellow-well-met with the men on the roads. There's not one of them would give him away," the Schoolmaster said.

"I could run them." The line on Davey's mouth tightened. "And safer than Conal, I've been thinking. Some of the cows have father's brand on them. Most of the calves ought to have the D.C. by rights, I suppose. They've got the cut of our Ayrshires, though Conal's done the double M's pretty neatly on them.

"What's the old man's will be mine some day, and so they're in a sort of way my cattle too. I can say, I don't think Ayrmuir had any right—not much anyway—to them, if we couldn't get them. The old man wouldn't risk a couple of horses on the off-chance. Rosses and Morrisons lost three horses when they had a go for 'em,

besides there isn't a man on our place could have yarded them. Conal got them. We were with him. You can hold his share for this batch when I bring it to you. But I'm going to drive, saying they are Donald Cameron's cattle. So they are, most of them. I'll be driving my own cattle as a matter of fact, though it may be realising on the estate, a forced loan from the old man, you may say. My name will carry me through and when the deal's over I can make it right with father. I'm going home."

"Can't think what Conal means, leavin' 'em so long," Steve muttered irritably.

"We can't have them on our hands any longer!"

Davey's voice was short and irritable too.

"You're right, Davey." The Schoolmaster spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "What you say makes the getting rid of them sound easy, but I hardly like the idea of——"

"Taking your share, after the way I've put it?" Davey interrupted. "But as far as I'm concerned they're Conal's beasts, and your's—and mine—because we got them. Nobody else could, and they weren't any good to anybody eating their heads off in the hills. But for all the world it's as if I had contracted with you to do it on behalf of the estate. Ayrmuir gets a third of the profits. I'll hand it over to the old man—and as likely as not he'll be glad enough to see it, for a couple of dozen break-aways and scrubbers he never expected to make a penny out of again."

The Schoolmaster's gesture of impatience was one of resignation also.

"It's a specious argument, Davey," he said, "but I wish to heaven you'd kept clear of the whole business."

That evening Davey called Deirdre and they wandered down the hillside, watching the sun set on the distant edge of the plains that stretched, northwards and inland, from the rise beyond Steve's.

"I'm going to-morrow," he said, and told her of the promise he had made his mother. "I feel it's up to me to carry this job through, but when it's over I'm coming back—going home. When I come back will you marry me, Deirdre?"

"Yes," she said simply. "But if you'd only give up going, Davey!"

Davey's face had a look of his father for the moment, a sombre obstinacy.

"There's something in the game," he said. "You're on your mettle to carry it through when you've begun. But you needn't worry. I'll be all right. My story'll be good enough if there is any trouble."

Deirdre sighed.

"But I can't bear the thought of your going," she said. "If only you wouldn't!"

CHAPTER XXXIX

DEIRDRE watched Davey going out of Narrow Valley in the dim starlight of the early spring morning, the mob, hustled by Teddy and the dogs, a stream of red and brown and dappled hides before him. The cows lifted their heads, bellowing protestingly; their breath steamed before them in the chill air. The horses and dogs, heeling and wheeling them, and the trampling hoofs of the herd, beat a wraith-like mist from the cold, and still sleeping earth.

Davey was to steer by the stars till he came to a point on the road that would give him a clear and easy descent to the sale yards on the outskirts of Melbourne. It was too late in the year to try the usual route. He was to take a winding track on the edge of the swamp that lay between the southern hills and Port Phillip. Only the blacks knew the paths through the brown-feathered reeds and dense ti-tree scrubs. Conal had tried to cross it once in the summer and got bogged there, losing a score of fine beasts. If Conal could not find his way across it, the Schoolmaster did not think that Davey could. It was only in case of untoward happenings that he advised trusting to the black boy's knowledge of the tracks through the swamp, and taking to the cover of the moss-dark, almost impenetrable, scrub that covered it.

Davey had given his word to the Schoolmaster that if he met Conal he would give the cattle over to him and return to the hills.

"I'd give everything I've got in the world if you'd never been brought into this business," he had said, deeply moved, just before Davey rode out.

"Father's blaming himself, Davey," Deirdre said.

Davey wrung the Schoolmaster's hand.

"I wouldn't have been in it, if I hadn't broken my word to you," he said. "I promised you when I brought up that first mob for Conal, I'd clear out after, didn't I? But Conal offered me the job, and—you bet I wouldn't 've been out of a moonlighting either, if I could 've helped it."

"But this business—I never meant you to be in it," Farrel said bitterly. "I never meant to be in it myself, Davey. Circumstances were too strong for me. A drowning man clutches a straw, they say."

Deirdre had ridden to the valley. She had watched the mob go out across the plains, watched until men, cattle, horses and dogs, a moving blur in the mists, disappeared altogether, and the faint lowing of the beasts came to her no longer.

She waited impatiently for news of Davey, though she knew none could come for weeks. There were few travellers on this overland track. Conal and one or two others had used it, with Teddy to guide them if they wanted to take the short cut across the scrubs of the swamp. There were well-defined northern paths into New South Wales: but it was a long and round-about journey to Port Phillip from the southern ranges.

"Father," Deirdre said impulsively, one morning soon after Davey had gone. "I'm going to see Mrs. Cameron. I've been thinking she must be anxious about Davey and wanting news of him."

"She'll be glad to see you, no doubt," he said.

"There's one subject you won't speak to her of, though, Deirdre," he added after a moment's hesitation.

She knew what he meant. He did not want Mrs. Cameron to know that his sight was almost gone.

"Yes, I understand," Deirdre said.

Socks, as sensitive to the keen air, the sunshine, the fluty rippings and joy-callings of the birds as Deirdre was, rollicked gaily down the track to Cameron's. His white stockings flashed as he thudded along; his unshod hoofs fell with a soft beat on the grassy waysides. Deirdre sang softly to herself as they passed under the arching trees. Her thoughts went drifting away dreamily to the time when Davey would come back and she would call going to Ayrmuir, "going home."

It was an eager, tremulous greeting that Mrs. Cameron gave her.

"It's you, dearie," she said. "I am glad to see you, indeed! What can you tell me of Davey? He was to have come home to us and I haven't seen him for weeks."

There was much to tell and yet much that the girl, in her tender solicitude for Davey's mother, could not tell. It would terrify her to know that someone had shot at and nearly killed him, that Davey had an enemy who would go to these lengths. When he was back with her, he might tell her himself what had kept him away; but it would stretch her soul to the limit of anguish, Deirdre knew, to tell her now.

"Yes, Davey told me he was coming home," Deirdre said, smiling.

Her eyes met Davey's mother's with their secret no secret; but Mary Cameron was thinking only of her boy, and in her anxiety, although she realised that Davey and Deirdre understood each other, she did not ask any questions, and Deirdre said nothing, thinking it was for Davey to tell his mother.

"I knew you'd be anxious about him," the girl said

with a sigh, "and that's why I came. He's gone over- and with some of Maitland's cattle; but he ought to be back in a week now, and then he'll be coming straight here."

"Ah, dear!" Tears welled in Mrs. Cameron's eyes. "How glad I'll be."

Deirdre went with her into the well-known parlour, and they sat down and talked together awhile. There was a new and tender understanding between them. Mrs. Cameron talked of her loneliness and the joy Davey's home-coming would be to her.

"Oh, I have prayed so, Deirdre," she said. "It has nearly broken my heart being without him . . . what with the long nights here, and the sorrow that has come upon us. . . ."

That was all she said of the other trouble, yet it had almost broken her, and had taken all her fortitude and patient wifeliness to endure. An instinct of blind fidelity was part of Mary Cameron.

When Deirdre was going she kissed her. There was lingering affection in the pressure of her lips.

"My heart goes out to you, dear," she said. "It's almost as if you were my own child. I love you like that, Deirdre. It was good of you to come to-day. Now I will get Davey's room ready for him . . . and the little room you used to sleep in. You'll be coming to stay with us again when he comes home, won't you? Oh, I could laugh and cry with happiness to think the old times will come again."

Deirdre laughed, a little laugh of shy joyousness. She could not tell Mrs. Cameron that she would be coming to stay with her altogether soon.

"Davey will be able to get on better with his father now," Mrs. Cameron continued, giving expression to her dreams. "He will be able to get Donald to do what

he wants, without angering him. His father has lost many of the ways he had, and you wouldn't believe how he loves the boy, in spite of everything. It's a strange, dour way a man has of loving sometimes, dear—hard to bear. It's love all the same—not love the way women love—that tries to make life easy for the dear one. It's all tenderness and sacrifice a woman's love, Deirdre. . . .”

“Sometimes a man loves that way too,” Deirdre said.

She had swung into her saddle and was looking away before her, over the mist-wreathed hills. For a moment her eyes lay on Mrs. Cameron's face with its grey-green eyes, delicate contour, exquisite line of lips, loving and lovable. Her face had lost its youthful freshness, but its beauty was unimpaired, so tender its expression, so compelling and pure the light of her eyes, though a lonely soul looked out of them, pained and wondering.

Deirdre pressed her heels into the chestnut: she and the horse disappeared among the trees.

She talked of Mrs. Cameron to her father.

“It would break your heart to see the change in her,” she said.

“But I can't see her any more,” he said brusquely.

Deirdre realised the wound that she had opened. She had never quite forgiven Davey's mother for the fact that Dan had lost his sight on her account. Mrs. Cameron never seemed to realise it and that had angered the girl. Perhaps Mrs. Cameron did not know what the Schoolmaster had done for her, Deirdre told herself sometimes. But Davey knew and she could hardly believe that Mrs. Cameron was ignorant, though she never seemed to take the Schoolmaster's injury as a personal matter.

Deirdre looked down on his face, dark and sombre now. Scarcely anything of its old reckless gaiety was

left. Lines had been carved on it by bitter thought and brooding on the utter night he was travelling into.

She rubbed her soft cheek against his.

"Tell me," he said, with an effort, "how she looks, Deirdre."

"She looks," the girl said hesitatingly. "She looks—I can't explain how—as if something that burned inside of her had gone out."

"But she's beautiful—like she used to be," he begged. "She used to have a way of looking at you that I never saw with anybody else——"

His voice was trembling.

"Yes," Deirdre said slowly. "She's beautiful like she used to be, though her hair's got grey in it . . . and the colour of the pink orchids has gone out of her skin. And she looks at you that way—I know what you mean—as if she were seeing . . . not only the outside you. . . . It's her eyes . . . and the way her lips lie together tell you about her real self and make you love her—even when you don't want to!"

The Schoolmaster threw himself back in his chair.

Deirdre gazed at him, then she turned away with a little sigh.

His face was almost a mirror to her now that he was blind. She could see his thoughts in it. It was sacred to her, that thin, lined face, all its reverence and emotion; but she could not bear to look at it and feel that she was stealing his secrets when his eyes could not guard them from her.

She went to the seat under the window and sat there thinking, idly, aimlessly, for awhile. Recollections of Mrs. Cameron were always those of a woman occupied with her home, her husband and son. Deirdre wondered how her father came to be in Mrs. Cameron's debt,

as he had said he was, how it was he owed her anything at all. She seemed to owe him so much.

The cows had gathered up to the fence near the bails for the milking. They were lowing quietly, the sunshine making a luminous mist behind them; the birds were laughing and hooting among the trees.

Deirdre rose to go and do the milking, but Steve burst open the door from the tap-room.

A moment before there had been a clatter of hoofs on the shingle. Steve stood on the threshold, the muscles of his face twitching.

"It's Pete M'Coll from the Wirree," he gasped. "He says—they've got Davey at Port Phillip for duffing!"

CHAPTER XL

It was early next morning that Cameron's cart with its slowly moving, heavy grey horse drew up before Steve's, and Mrs. Cameron herself got down from it.

The Schoolmaster was pacing the long kitchen. He had not been still a moment since Pete M'Coll brought his news. Pete had gone back to the Wirree to see if anything more had been heard of Davey, whether he was to be brought back to the district for trial, or was being held in Melbourne. The story of his arrest had come through on the vessel that brought stores to Port Southern, but it was very vague. A rumour had reached the *Albatross* an hour or two before she was sailing that a young man saying he was David Cameron—Young Davey—Cameron of Ayrmuir's son, had been arrested for cattle-stealing, and that he and a nigger were being detained on the charge. Pete had not returned, but the Schoolmaster set about making preparations for a journey. Deirdre had packed his tucker bag; his blanket was rolled up to strap on his saddle.

"Which way are you going?" Deirdre asked.

She knew that the schooner would probably be gone before he could reach the Port, and that it would continue its passage along the coast to Rane before turning back and making for Port Phillip. He had thought of all that too.

"I'll ride," he said.

"What are you going to do," she asked anxiously.

"I don't know!"

Out of the chaos of his thoughts no plan of action had yet formed.

Then Mrs. Cameron came. Deirdre brought her into the kitchen.

"It's Mrs. Cameron, father," she said, and left them.

Farrel turned in the direction of her voice. He made a movement towards Mrs. Cameron, who was standing just within the doorway. His hand went out with a seeking motion.

"I . . . I can't see you," he said, a little querulously.

Her hand met his.

She knew from his face the desperate and troubled state of mind he was in, and he, hers, from her fluttered breath and the sob that went with it.

"I've come to ask you to keep a promise," she said.

"Yes?"

"You remember the promise?"

For a moment he did not remember any words—any formal undertaking; but he knew to what she referred.

"You said . . . long ago," her voice was scarcely audible, "that if ever you could do anything for me or mine——"

"Yes," he said. "If ever I can do anything, I want to."

She sank into a chair. Her hands flew to her bonnet strings. She untied them.

"You know what it is I want you to do?" she asked.

"Yes."

He felt for his chair. It was near the one she had taken. He sat down and turned his face towards her. He could just see a dim outline of her against the morning brightness. To him she was a grey figure with a heavy black shadow about her. He strained to meet her eyes again. The very magic of them seemed to illumine her face for him, show him its beautiful outlines. And yet

perhaps, he did not see them at all. It was all memory and vivid imagining that gave him the illusion. He did not see her face, thin and lined with pain and loneliness, the patience and vague disappointment that had come to dwell in her eyes.

"I want you to get the boy off for me . . . to have this charge removed," she said, tremulously.

The Schoolmaster knew that this was what he had meant to try to do; but now that she had asked him, he told himself that it must be done. The means employed to lift the burden of blame from Davey's shoulders he knew—would have to be very sure ones. Davey, himself, would not say anything to implicate Conal or anyone else. Evidently the story of his droving for Donald Cameron had not carried much weight.

"Yes," the Schoolmaster said, "I will."

He had no doubt of himself now that she had appealed to him.

"Oh," she cried, after a few moments. "I knew that it was some mischief to us McNab was planning. I can see it all now. I thought it was you, or Conal, he was trying to get at. McNab told Donald that cattle were being moonlighted—most of them Ayrmuir breakaways and wild cattle—at the back of our hills. But he did not know that Davey was droving for Conal, not till he asked me this morning, and I told him. I didn't know myself till a few days ago, when Davey came to me after church. Then he said he'd been working with Conal, and I begged him not to any more, and told him what his father and McNab were trying to do. He promised to come home, but he never came. I was afraid to tell his father for fear he'd never forgive him, and every day I thought Davey'd be coming in the gate. McNab knew, of course. Everybody else in the Wirree seems to have known, but us, that Davey was with Conal.

It was to bring our pride in the dust, to make Davey's father the shamed and disgraced man he is, he did it. But where's Conal? How is it he's not there with Davey? Why did Davey ever go in for this business? Why are you in it? I thought that you would never be doing anything again that would bring you under the law."

The distress and reproach in her voice hurt him.

"I thought so too," he said bitterly.

He did not attempt to excuse himself; and the sightless eyes that gazed at her did not accuse.

His mind was back to the subject between them.

"This is the concern of two men, I and another," he said. "Davey was no more than a hired drover. Besides——"

"Where is Conal?" Mrs. Cameron asked.

"Away."

His tone forbade further inquiry.

There was silence a moment.

"How does Mr. Cameron take it?"

"He's broken altogether."

"Would he"—the Schoolmaster hesitated—"would he consent to say that Davey was droving for him. There were D.C. cows in the mob."

Mrs. Cameron hesitated.

"I think he would do anything—anything in the world to get the boy off," she said.

"I don't know that it would do . . . whether it would work," the Schoolmaster said a little wearily. "Probably Davey has said that he was putting the mob through for his father. He said he would if anything happened. If inquiries are made, will you tell Mr. Cameron to back up the story . . . it's the only chance. Davey may have been only detained until it could be ascertained whether he is Donald Cameron's son and whether Cameron authorised him to sell the cattle. It

would be a splendid opportunity to spoil McNab's game, if it could be done. . . . But if, for some reason I don't know of yet, it can't be worked, there's another way."

"You mean you'll say you were responsible. Davey was only a drover with you," Mrs. Cameron asked.

"Yes."

She uttered a little cry.

"It was what I meant you to do, but I can't bear to think of it," she said.

She covered her face with her hands.

The Schoolmaster was thinking deeply too; the iron of despair had entered his soul.

"What will it mean?" she asked, looking up at him.

"'Three years hard labour on the roads of the Colony or other place as the judge may direct,' " he quoted, his voice a little uncertain.

"Tell me," she said, rising, a tide of feeling carrying fire to her eyes, dignity to her figure and a subtle timbre to her voice, "would you rather I had not come? Would you rather I had let Davey take his punishment? I'm not sure that he does not deserve it in spite of what you say."

"No!" Farrel cried, passionately.

He grasped her hand. His face fell over it.

"It is the best thing in the world . . . for me . . . to do something for you," he said.

Mrs. Cameron caught her breath when for a moment he carried her fingers to his lips.

"You'll look after Deirdre," he said, "if——"

"Yes."

She stood uncertainly looking at him, a pitiful, quivering emotion in her eyes; then she moved away.

"Good-bye," he said, mechanically, hearing the brush of her garments as she left the room.

"Good-bye," she said.

Deirdre saw that Mrs. Cameron's cheeks were wet with tears when she climbed into the buggy again. She did not speak, but drove silently away.

Deirdre had been rubbing Bess's nose and feeding her with handfuls of grass. When she went back to the kitchen her father was sitting with his arms over the side of his chair, his head on them. She flew to him; her arms entwined him. But he pushed her away, with unconscious roughness.

"Go away!" he whispered.

An angry pain at his grief, at Mrs. Cameron who in some way had been the cause of it, surged through Deirdre.

Pete M'Coll rode into the yard. He threw his bridle over the hitching post.

"Any news?" Deirdre asked.

He shook his head and went into the kitchen.

Later the Schoolmaster called Steve in. She heard Steve's voice raised complainingly, her father's, with settled determination, against it. Her heart was sore. Why was he not telling her his plans as he was telling Steve?

She heard him arranging to take Pete with him to Melbourne.

"I'm going too, father," she cried, flashing into the kitchen. "What have I done that you shouldn't tell me what you are going to do. You're talking to every one else, and my heart's breaking."

The Schoolmaster drew her into his arms. "You're not coming, dear," he said. "You're best out of this. I want you to wait here with Steve till Davey comes back."

"And you too, father?"

He held her close in his arms.

"Yes, me too, of course, darling."

He crushed her face against his.

"It's great times we've had together, my darling, isn't it?" he asked. "I don't like going without you, but it's better. It's great times we've had together . . . and now I'm an old blind devil that wouldn't be able to look after you properly in the town. It's not a nice place for a girl to be going about in, and I'd be no good to look after you—no more than a burden. Pete here'll be my guide and take me by the track round the swamp to Melbourne. He says he couldn't do the short cut across the swamp, but he knows the roundabout track all right. We'll have to be busy on Davey's account then. You'll be a good wife to Davey, won't you, darling? And happy as the day's long when he gets back. But you do love me, too, don't you, darling black head? For God's sake say you love me."

His voice broke.

Deirdre flung her arms about him, reckless of all but that some trouble within had forced that cry. There was a bitter undertone in his words that she did not understand, although she associated them in some way with Davey's mother and the disturbance and mental turmoil into which Davey's arrest had put him.

"I love you," she cried, "more than all the world—more than Davey, more than anyone or anything in it!"

He stooped and kissed her.

"What a jealous brute I am," he murmured, "to have taken that from you."

"There's nothing you haven't told me?" she asked, searching his face.

"No," he replied, turning his face from her and burying it in her hair.

"You haven't told me anything at all of what you're going to do to get Davey off," she said sharply.

"Oh, well," he parried. "I don't know . . . I

haven't decided . . . it will depend upon circumstances."

He recognised the anxiety of her voice.

"You aren't going to try and get him off by putting yourself in his place, are you?" she asked, doubtfully. "You've really been less in the thing than he has, and he's young and strong and——"

"Oh no," the Schoolmaster laughed lightly. "I wouldn't try to do that!"

He went out to the stable-yard. When the Kangaroo was saddled, he took Deirdre in his arms again.

She watched him cantering down the road on the great raking grey, towards the inland plains, Pete M'Coll, on one of Steve's horses, a few yards behind him. The thought of that cry of his troubled her. Why had he said: "For God's sake, say you love me!"

The flood of her love for him rose and filled her, the love of all those early years, when he had been mother, brother and playfellow. Little pictures of his tenderness, of his gay good-fellowship, of his care, flitted before her. Because for years it had moved so tranquilly, she had scarcely realised the depth and power of that passionate affection, but now that he had called for it, showed his need of it, as he had never done even in the old days, it surged tempestuously.

CHAPTER XLI

"So the Schoolmaster's swearin' young Davey Cameron was no more than a hired drover to him," said McNab.

He was talking to Steve.

"What's that you're saying?"

Deirdre came to the doorway.

McNab had just arrived. A skinny, raw-boned boy from the Wirree was taking his horse and cart to the stables. She had seen it draw up a few minutes before and wondered why McNab had come. She had heard Steve's greeting to him and McNab's reply.

"Oh, there you are, Deirdre," he said, shuffling towards her and holding out his hand. She disregarded it, looking into his eyes.

McNab was in a good temper. The smile wrinkling the skin about his mouth told that he had some secret cause for being well pleased with himself and the world at large. He could afford to forgive her.

"What's that you were saying about father?" she asked.

"Haven't you heard? Why it's out of the world you are here, Steve. It's the talk of Wirreeford this business of young Davey duffin'! And the Schoolmaster says it's none of Davey Cameron's business, but his. I wasn't sure Farrel was in it meself, before—had me suspicions of course—but nothing to go on. Conal's business I knew it was; but the devil who gave him long legs knows where he is. He knew when to leave. Smells a sinking ship like a rat at sea, Conal does."

Neither Deirdre nor Steve spoke. McNab's eyes wandered from one to the other of them. He continued, chuckling, as though enjoying the joke :

"He's saying—the Schoolmaster—that Young Davey was a good stockman, and when he quarrelled with his father he gave him a job and was paying him wages, reg'lar, till he got something else to do, or went home again. And there was no more to it than that. Davey, of course, tried to bluff things out at first ; but there was an information out, signed by Cameron, so the story wouldn't wash that he was on D.C's. business."

Deirdre clenched her hands as McNab giggled ; there was a malicious, slow glimmer in his eyes as they rested on her.

"When Cameron got a suspicion someone was liftin' cattle from the back hills, he was busy enough givin' information—keen enough to catch the moonlighters ! But he didn't reck'n on his boy being taken in charge of a mob.

"Troopers in Melbourne didn't believe Davey's yarn about being his father's son, seein' they'd got Donald Cameron's written word against mobs coming from the South to the markets thereabouts. Farrel's story is a good 'un. He says he struck a bargain with Donald Cameron, as agent for Maitland & Co., stock and store dealers, of Cooburra, New South Wales, a couple of years ago. These beasts were to have gone over the border when next some of Maitland's stockmen were in the South ; but the rivers were down, the stock rollin' fat, and prices up, so he thought it a pity to lose the market, and sent Young Davey with 'm round the swamp to Melbourne yards, not telling him details of the deal. Davey havin' had a difference with his father was glad of the job ; it's a sort of challenge to Cameron. Clever of the Schoolmaster ! I wonder what D. C. 'll do about it.

He can see it's a let-off for Davey, if he stands to it! a let-off for the Schoolmaster too. If he doesn't—well, I think Davey, 'n your father, my dear, 'll spend a bit of time on the roads.

"The queer part of the business is that though half a dozen men's beasts may be in the mob, the brands 've been so neatly faked, no one can swear to 'em. All the clear skins 've got Maitland's brand on. So the charge of cattle-stealin' 'll stand or fall be what Cameron says—or does. A couple of white-faced cows with D.C. on 'm are the only give-aways in the lot!"

"He won't put his own son away," blurted Steve.

"P'raps! P'raps not!"

McNab fidgeted.

"Hardly likely!" Deirdre cried.

"Mick Ross 'n Bud Morrison were in here, couple of nights ago," Steve went on. "And they said they'd swear blind none of their beasts were in the lot. All the hill settler's 'd be prepared to do the same, they said—rather than put Davey or the Schoolmaster in a fix."

"Y—es," snarled McNab, "so I'm told!"

Deirdre laughed. His disgust and disappointment delighted her.

"You didn't reckon on that, did you, Mr. McNab," she said.

She went off down the road to the paddock where Steve's two milking cows were, and presently, drove them, one swinging before the other, into the yard at the back of the shanty. She was easier in her mind than she had been since the Schoolmaster had gone—even since Davey rode out of Narrow Valley. But the sight of McNab disturbed her. She bailed and leg-roped the cows. Wondering why he had come, as she milked, and the milk fell with a gentle swish into the pail between her knees, she could not believe that it was merely to bring

them the good news that Davey and the Schoolmaster were likely to get off.

She turned the cows into the paddock beside the bails and took the pail of warm, sweet-smelling milk indoors.

When she went into the kitchen McNab was sitting in the big chair by the fire. He looked up at her. The fire-light showed his face and the smile that glimmered on it. He seemed to be remembering, and with triumph, that other night when he had sat there.

Steve, crouched on the bench opposite him, was shivering and sobbing.

Deirdre put the milk in its place.

"What's the matter? What have you done to him?" she cried, facing McNab.

He took a heavy chain from his pocket. It clanked with a dull, slow sound.

Steve started from his chair.

"Oh, send him away, Deirdre, send him away!" he sobbed.

Deirdre knew the meaning of the trick. She had heard it often. It was an old dodge to discover escaped convicts, this clanking of a chain near them. A man who had worn irons never forgot the sound they made, and whenever he heard it would start and tremble. The rage that burned to a white heat kept her silent a moment.

"You'd never 've thought it, would you, Deirdre? Him a lag, and you a lag's daughter?" McNab chuckled.

"It's a lie!"

"Is it? You ask—Uncle Steve. It's been a puzzle to me, more'n eighteen years, why two chaps from the Island never came for the help that was promised 'm, and they with a reward out against them. I knew they'd got safe up the river because a boat was found on the bank, beyond where M'Laughlin's is now. I meant to touch a

bit of that reward, too, but it's never too late to mend, as they say."

"You'd never send us back to the Island?" Steve cried.

"You'd never do that, McNab?"

"Wouldn't I?"

McNab laughed softly. He was enjoying the spectacle of Steve's whimpering, the trembling of his withered limbs—the sense of power that it gave him.

"You——" Deirdre gasped; but anger choked her.

"There, now," he interrupted. "I wouldn't be calling me names, if I were you, Deirdre. After the pretty way you treated me a month or two ago, too. Would you be forgettin', my dear? It would be a pity to make an enemy of me, as I said once before. It's a bad enemy I make, they say, and a nasty temper I've got when I'm roused. But there's nothing I wouldn't do for you, Deirdre. You can twist me round your little finger if you like."

The firelight was in his eyes.

"See here, Steve," he said. "I've got something to say to Deirdre. She's a sensible girl, got her head well-screwed on. We're old pals, me 'n Deirdre. You go outside while I talk things over with her. We'll see what can be done."

Steve scuttled across the room. He was crying helplessly, and pulled his coat sleeve across his nose as he went to the door.

"Now," McNab said genially, "you sit there, Deirdre, and we can talk."

Deirdre took the chair Steve had left. She sat very stiff and straight in it. She knew what was coming. There were fear and loathing in her eyes. But McNab only saw how great and dark they were, how red the curve of her lips, how full of vigour and grace the lines of her strong, young body.

"You know what'll happen if it's known Farrel's an escaped convict?" he asked.

" Yes."

" Port Arthur, irons 'n the rest of it! Well, nobody need know, lest I like. There's a couple of lads can prove who Steve and y'r father are, but they won't—lest I like."

" What are you going to like? That's what I want to know," Deirdre cried, her hands gripping the arms of the chair.

" Depends on you, my dear ! "

He leant forward.

There was appeal in her eyes. But her eagerness, her hunted wild-bird air only stirred in McNab a lust for the capture and taming of her.

" If you promise to marry me, nothing 'll be heard of it," he said.

Deirdre was not surprised. She had expected something like what he had said. The sound of it stunned her nevertheless.

" P'raps the Schoolmaster'll get off this affair of the cattle, but that's only three years," McNab said. " The other 'd be till the expiration of his sentence, probably for the end of his life, my dear ; 'n Steve—a month or two 'd be the end of him! You're the price of their freedom. You pays y'r money and takes y'r choice, Deirdre."

Deirdre did not hear him. After all, she was thinking, this was a proposition. She was even grateful for it. Anything seemed better than helplessness, hopelessness—the terrible prospect of not being able to avert this ultimate catastrophe which threatened Dan. All that had been sensitive to joy or sorrow in her seemed dead. She realised only one overwhelming necessity. One fact, crowding out all others, filled her mind. Thad McNab had said that Dan would have to go back to the Island and that she could prevent it. She did not think of Davey at all, except to remember, vaguely, that she had promised to marry him, and that now she was going to

break her promise and say that she would marry McNab, if——

She looked at him as he sat by the hearth. Misshapen, with unkempt, brakish hair and beard, turning grey, wrinkled and withered, he was no mate for her glowing youth! But what did that matter? She saw the Schoolmaster's face as she had last seen it—the dear, thin, eager face with deep lines, drawn by the sleepless ache of his heart, on it. She knew now why there had been an underlying grief and bitterness in what he said when he went away; knew that he must have been afraid of recognition and its consequences. But Mrs. Cameron had required him to save Davey. It was all plain now. Yet Deirdre realised that what he had done he would probably have done without her having to ask for it. What part had Mrs. Cameron had in his life that she could command him—that she dared ask him to lay down his life for her? What had she done for him? In the old time the Schoolmaster had said: "We owe her more than either you or I can hope to repay, Deirdre." But surely he had paid—on the night of the fires if at no other time. And now——

McNab's gaze on her recalled her mind to what he had said.

She met it steadily, unwaveringly.

Yes. She would marry him, if—— Her thought went back on its track. If what? Yes, if Dan got off—if he did not get the three years. If he had to go to prison for three years, then it would be no use to marry McNab. He could not help Dan then. For three years he would have to live in a prison, wear filthy, hideous clothes, work like a beast of burden.

"I'll tell you this day week," she said.

"Think you'll know then how the trial's goin'," he snarled. "Well, there's an end to three years, don't

forget, my pretty, and if he gets an acquittal on this, the other'll come out, unless——"

She measured him with her eyes.

"You marry me the day he is free of this charge—if he gets free—or on the day he gets his three years—if he's goin' to get them, and you don't want 'm to be for life."

He leaned forward, his voice husky with eagerness.

"If you change y'r mind, my dear, of course I can change mine."

He laughed uneasily, his fingers twitching.

"But I'll give you till this day week to make up y'r mind which it is to be. Then you give me y'r answer. Is it a bargain?"

"Yes," Deirdre said. She was dull and weary—beaten.

He rose from his chair and shuffled towards the door.

"Then I'll go and get the house ready for you," he cried, gleefully. "I'm not afraid what y'r answer'll be. Oh, you're snared, my pretty bird, and there's no way out for you, if you'd keep Dan Farrel, as he calls himself, out of the darbies, and him in his blindness, going to the Island again! It's taken a heap of schemin' to get you—but I set my mind on you when I saw you a slip of a girl coquettin' with Conal, at Hegarty's—the night you came back to the Wirree."

The desolation of her attitude reassured him.

"Good-bye, my 'pretty," he said in the doorway. "And someday, when y'r my wife, Deirdre, you'll kiss me good-bye."

He went out with a chattering clatter of laughter.

Steve came back to the kitchen.

"Have you been able to manage him, Deirdre?" he asked, feverishly. "What have you said to him? To go back there——"

His face worked pitifully; his hands twisted over each other.

"You don't know what it is like. I'd kill myself rather than go back, Deirdre. And your father! What'll he do? It'll be worse for him than for me. He's got you to think of. What did McNab say? Will he do anything for you, Deirdre? He said he would do anything in the world for you. And you'd want him to help us, wouldn't you? You wouldn't let Dan and y'r old Uncle Stevie, go over there again?"

"It'll be all right," she said, looking past him. "You mustn't think of it any more, Stevie. It was just to worry you, he said that."

"Oh, it's a wonderful girl you are!" He clung to her hand, fondling it, tears streaming down his cheeks. "Nobody here to save us, your father and me, but you, Deirdre! And you to deal with McNab—send him away with a smile—pleased with himself."

No idea of the terms McNab was likely to have made with her occurred to him.

"If only there'd been someone here to help us," she cried passionately. "If only father, or Davey, or even Conal, had been here! But to have had to meet it alone."

Her voice broke. She began to cry, finding relief in utter abandonment. Steve put his arms round her, trying to comfort her.

"Deirdre! Deirdre!" he muttered distressfully. "Don't cry! It's your father's own girl you are. So brave! Meetin' the devil himself with your clear eyes, 'n me no more than a shiverin' old corpse where he is!"

Deirdre lifted her eyes. She looked into the pathetic quivering childish, old face bent over her.

"It's the best thing you could have said to me—that I'm my father's own girl, Uncle Stevie," she said. "My father's girl shouldn't be crying like this when there's work—and a lot of thinking to do."

CHAPTER XLII

"THERE'S bad news from Cameron's, Deirdre."

Steve came in from the road.

A bullock wagon had just passed from the Wirree. Deirdre had seen it halt up. She had seen the bullocks standing with dumb, dull patience under the yoke, swinging their tails to keep the flies off. Some of them had gone down on their knees by the roadside, while the teamster had a drink and yarned with Steve. Then she had heard the cracking of the teamster's whip, his oaths and calls to the beasts, and the creaking of the heavy, blue-washed cart as it went on again.

"What is it?" she asked breathlessly, thinking of Davey.

"Old Cameron," Steve said. "Johnny Watson says he was found dead on the road by Long Gully—a tree fallen on him—this morning."

"Steve!"

There was horror, and yet a vague relief, in her exclamation.

"Johnny says, Cameron went down to the Black Bull yesterday evening, and there was trouble between him and McNab—McNab having let him in for this cattle stealin' case, knowing Davey was in it," Steve went on. "But Thad got round him somehow, telling him that he didn't know Davey was in it, and he'd get off, anyhow, bein' Cameron's son. Buttered the old man up that way. Conal and the Schoolmaster'd be nabbed for sure, he made out. They were good

enough friends when they parted only he'd had more'n a jugful, and a couple of the boys had to give him a leg-up to his horse. The brute must 've shied at the dead tree near the gully, the ground was cut up round it. It fell on them both. Mrs. Cameron found 'm this morning."

"I'll go and see if there's anything I can do for her."

Deirdre took her hat down from behind the door.

Steve went on talking of Donald Cameron, muttering in his vague, childish fashion.

"However he came to get in with McNab I can't make out," he said. "There weren't no two greater enemies a while back. Oh, he was as mean as you make them, D.C., but he made his mark in the country."

Deirdre had on her hat.

"I'm going, Steve," she said. "I won't stay unless Mrs. Cameron's got no one with her; but the Rosses and Mrs. Morrison are sure to be there."

"Right, Deirdre!" he replied.

She took her bridle from its nail by the door, and went into the paddock beyond the stable, calling the chestnut. He heard her cry: "Coup lad! coup laddie!" and saw the white-stocking, at her call, come galloping across the newly-green grass, gilded with sunshine. She slipped the bridle over his head, brought him into the yard, saddled him and turned out to the road.

With thoughts of the tragedy that had befallen Mrs. Cameron, as she went along the winding track under the trees, were woven wonderings as to how Donald Cameron's sudden death would affect Davey and the Schoolmaster.

It was on the roadside by the Long Gully that Mr. Cameron had died. The old tree by the gully had fallen at last, and on Donald Cameron. At Rane, while Dan and she were living there, a man had been killed

by a falling tree, but it was strange that Davey's father should have died in this way, she thought, he who had been the first settler in the hills.

She wondered if he had ring-barked the tree—scored its living green wood—if he had killed it, and in turn it had killed him, pinning him to the earth with its great bulk of dead and rotting timber. She could see Davey's father, heavy, squarely-built, in shabby, dark clothes, lying beneath it, his grey hair blood-dabbled, his face bruised and blackened. The man who had conquered the wilderness had lain there, on the very road he had made, broken, cast aside—a thing that life had done with. It was as if the wilderness had taken its revenge.

She slipped from the chestnut's back in a sunny clearing and gathered a handful of freckled and golden-eyed, white honey-flowers, twisted some tendrils of creepers and blades of ferns among them, and tied them together with a long piece of grass.

When she came in sight of the weatherboard house crouching against the purple wall of the hills, Deirdre realised again what Donald Cameron had done. The cleared paddocks spread round it on every side. An orchard climbing the slope to the left showed in dark leafage against the grey and green of the forest. Cattle dappled the furthest hillside. The barns and sheds and stables behind the house formed a small village. He had made it, cleared the forest for it. He had done all this, she realised, and so much besides, and now he was dead, the man of iron will and indefatigable energy.

There were two or three of the neighbours' carts in Cameron's yard.

Deirdre opened the gate and shut it when she and White Socks had passed through. She hung the

chestnut's bridle over a post by the barn, and lifted his saddle.

Speckled fowls and handsome buff and yellow pullets stalked about the yard, pecking industriously even under the legs of the Ross's and Morrison's horses, which, with harness looped back on them, their noses deep in fodder bags, stood beside the carts. In the brilliant sunshine, on a wood-stack, struck against the clear blue sky, a black rooster crowed at intervals.

Mrs. Cameron's sitting-room was in semi-darkness. Deirdre heard the hushed talking, exclamations and sound of weeping as she went into it.

"It's you, Deirdre!" Mrs. Cameron said when she saw the girl. Her voice was flat and tired; she seemed to have scarcely strength enough to speak.

Deirdre kissed her with quivering lips, and eyes welling.

The room was full of people. She did not see who they were at first in the half dark.

"If only Davey were here!" Mrs. Cameron cried.

Deirdre knelt beside her.

"Perhaps he'll come," she whispered.

"Did you gather the flowers for his father?"

Mrs. Cameron's eyes had fallen on the little bouquet in Deirdre's hands.

"I brought them for Davey," Deirdre said.

Mrs. Cameron's hands quivered in hers.

"We must keep her cheerful, not let her spirits get down," one of the visitors said in Deirdre's ear.

Jessie Ross brought in tea, and some newly-made scones.

"You must eat this now, dear, to keep up your strength," Mrs. Ross said to Mrs. Cameron, taking a chair beside her.

Mrs. Ross talked of her milking, and the calves

she had poddied during the wet weather; and the other women, gathering round, talked in serious and melancholy fashion of their milking and the calves they had had trouble with during the winter. They gave each other recipes for cream cheese, and jam, and cakes to be made without eggs.

"And I've discovered a sure way of making hens lay in the winter," said Mrs. Ross.

"Have you?" replied Mrs. Cameron, listlessly.

"Yes, indeed, and I'll tell you just what it is, Mary!"

"Oh, it's of no interest to me now, with Davey away and his father gone," Mrs. Cameron cried.

She kept her hold of Deirdre's hand.

"To think of him—Davey's father—in there, Deirdre—lying so still and cold, he that was so strong and nobody could break, or turn," she said. "You haven't seen him yet. You must come with me."

"Presently, dearie, but you must drink your tea and eat this little bit of scone first," Mrs. Ross said.

The neighbours talked again nervously, cheerfully, in subdued tones, of the weather, the sales, and what the men of their households were saying about things in general.

"We mustn't let her brood," they said anxiously to each other.

Mrs. Cameron did not seem to hear or notice them. When she stood in the silent room with Deirdre looking down on the white-sheeted figure of Davey's father, she turned to the girl with a sharp cry.

"It's a sad, sad thing to be parting from your life's mate, Deirdre," she said. "To think that he should have died like that . . . after all that he's done—he that made this hill country. To have gone without a word from anyone, or a clearing-up of the misunderstandings between us. And Davey not to see him again!"

She broke down and sobbed utterly.

Mrs. Ross and Mrs. Morrison took her, each by an arm, and led her back to the sitting-room. The hum of strained, subdued and cheerful conversation began again.

Mrs. Cameron went to the door with Deirdre.

"If only they'd let me be, child!" she cried, kissing her. "If only they'd let me be. It's very good of them all to bother, but if only they'd let me be!"

As the chestnut padded softly along the track home to Steve's, Deirdre wondered again what effect Donald Cameron's death would have on Davey and Dan. It would make Davey a rich man, she knew. Donald Cameron had been reputed wealthy when she and the Schoolmaster first came to the hills, and he had not been drinking long enough to have squandered much money. "It would take more than a gallon of rum to make old Cameron loosen his purse strings," she remembered having heard Conal say.

To Dan and to her it would make very little difference in the end. There would still be McNab. The train of her thought snapped. For a moment, with all her passionate youth, she envied Donald Cameron his stillness.

A night and a day remained before she would have to tell McNab that she had made her choice. Every beat of the chestnut's hoofs on the soft roadside drove what he had said into her brain. She knew no more now than she did a week ago what was going to happen to Davey and the Schoolmaster, or how the case was going. Perhaps less, since Donald Cameron's death. But her mind was made up as to what McNab's answer would be. She had never really had any doubt as to what it must be, and had asked for time as one asks

to have the window open before settling down to passing the day in a dark and airless room.

Deep in her mind there was still, however, a vagrant hope, a fairy, child-like thing, a phantom assurance of the impossibility of what was demanded of her, a belief, like thistle-down, as faint and fragile, that something unheard of, miraculous, would happen to help her, and at the same time save Dan and Steve and Davey.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE big kitchen was very quiet. The log that had been smouldering on the open hearth all day broke. Deirdre swept back the scattered embers and thrust the broken ends of wood together. Flames leapt over them, lighting the room.

They penetrated the shadows that bulked, huge and shapeless, at the end of it, revealing a hoard of store casks and boxes piled almost to the roof and half-cloaked with hessian bags sewed together. The barrel of a rifle slung on the walls glimmered for a moment; the fire-light showed stirrup irons and miscellaneous harnessing gear, halters and bridles hung over a peg near the door, a couple of horse-shoes nailed to it, and two or three hams in smoke-blackened bags with bunches of herbs beside them, strung up to the rafters.

A tallow dip cast a halo of garish light about Deirdre where she sat sewing; a broad gleam touched the crockery on the shelves behind her. The high-backed arm-chair in which Steve lay, slack and nodding drowsily, was drawn up before the fire.

The door to the bar, reached by a step from the kitchen, was open. A dip burned on the bench there, too, giving the dingy windows of the shanty a gleam for wayfarers. It was a wild night; the wind blowing from the southwest beat against the doors and rattled the windows of the frail building. The doors were all shut though it was still early.

Steve at last fell asleep in his chair. His heavy-

laboured breathing had the sound of a child sobbing. Deirdre looked up from her work, again and again, troubled by it. It increased her sense of desperation to hear him. The sound became unendurable. She got up at last and awakened him.

"Hadn't you better go to bed, Uncle Steve," she said, impatiently. "You'll catch your death of cold like this. It's too late for anybody to be coming our way now—and a bad night. I'll lock up."

"Yes, Deirdre," he murmured sleepily; "it's a bad night and too late for anybody to be coming our way."

She pulled the bolts across the doors at the front of the shanty and locked and bolted the door from the bar into the kitchen; then she took his arm, and helped him out of his chair. He had fallen back into it, nodding drowsily again. She led him over to his room, which opened off the kitchen.

"I'll see the lights and the fires are out," she said, "but I want to finish a bit of mending before I go to bed."

"Right," he murmured. "Right, Deirdre!"

The noise of the wind carried off the droning tones of his voice; but it was only a few moments before she heard his heavy breathing again.

The Schoolmaster's sock which she was darning dropped from her hand.

She stared into the darkness beyond the dip-light. She did not want to go to bed—to be alone in the darkness with her thoughts. In the kitchen she heard the creaking gossip of the fire and the whisper of falling embers. Besides, she wanted to keep her hands and brain busy. In the darkness there would be only the voice of the wind in her ears, and that was like the crying of her heart. She listened to the wind now. A mournful,

passionate thing, it murmured about the house, rising wildly, desperately, in blasts of sudden rage, and fell back into a thin, pitiful wailing of helplessness and despair. She was afraid to listen long, afraid of what this communicating, interpreting murmur might do with her reason. Yet the wind was with her, she thought. The wind knew her heart—the wind was the voice of her heart crying out there in the darkness.

She shivered, trying to banish the strange, fantastical ideas that swarmed upon her.

How to pass the night—this long night in which she must not think, or feel. To-morrow McNab would be coming. "You pays y'r money and you takes y'r choice, Deirdre," he had said. She saw his face as he had spoken, his twisted, sallow face, the glimmering of his malicious eyes, with the smile that spilled over from them. She had made her choice. She had set her mind to it. There must be no wavering. If the Schoolmaster got off, she must marry McNab; if he was sentenced to three years' imprisonment there would perhaps be time to scheme and out-manceuvre him. She would set her wits to that. But she could not think of the next day. She must think of Davey, or Dan, or Steve—any of them. There must be no shrinking, shrieking, or failing. What had to be done, had to be done, and the first thing that had to be done was to give McNab her word.

She picked up the sock she had been mending again. The needle slipped backwards and forwards, across, under and over, the dark threads. She worked steadily.

The voice of the wind drew her mind again. It tugged gently and then carried her away on its plaintive wailing. Her hands fell in her lap as she listened. Her heart swayed; it went out to the wind again.

There was a clatter of a horse's hoofs on the road. The sound startled her; but it was not until she heard

the dogs barking in the yard that she realised some late rider had come to Steve's, that there would be food and drink, and probably a shakedown, to get ready. She waited for the sound of footsteps on the verandah and a rap on the door of the bar. The back-door flung open and on a gust of wind and rain, a tall, gaunt figure swung into the kitchen.

"Conal!" Deirdre cried, and flew to him.

In her gladness at seeing him the past was a blurred page. She forgot it when she saw him in the doorway, his weather-beaten face turned to her. Her confidence in him, all the old joyous affection, rushed over her.

His face was shining with rain, his hair and beard wet. From the way his breath came and went, and the muscles were whipped out from his neck, she knew that he had been riding hard.

"They tell me Davey and Dan are on trial in Melbourne," he said.

"Yes."

"What happened? What's been doing, Deirdre?" he gasped. "I've only just heard of it. It's taken me a couple of days to get here. I don't know anything but what I've told you. Thought p'raps you could tell me something before I go up to them. And give me something to eat and drink. . . . I haven't had anything since yesterday morning."

He wrenched off his wet coat and dropped into Steve's chair.

He had a gauntness that Conal used not to have. But his eyes, those eyes of fierce tenderness, were the eyes of the big brotherly man who had been the companion of so many of her and the Schoolmaster's wanderings.

She quickly put some food on the table for him, set the kettle on the bar over the fire, and while he was eating told him what she knew of Davey's arrest and

Dan's going to swear Davey's innocence of the charge brought against him.

"Why did he do that? Davey was more in it than he was," Conal asked savagely.

"I don't know," Deirdre hesitated. "Yes, I do, Conal. It was because Mrs. Cameron——"

"Oh, that was it, was it?"

Conal went on eating, hungrily.

"What do they say about here? Do they think Davey'll get off and Dan'll have to pay?"

"You've heard of Mr. Cameron's death, Conal?" Deirdre asked. "They say that'll make all the difference. Davey can't very well be accused of stealing his own cattle, and McNab——"

"What has he got to say about it? Of course it's his hand in it all."

"He says . . . I'm the cause. . . ."

Her voice faltered.

"What's that?"

Conal's knife and fork clattered to the table.

"Did you know . . ." she asked, "did you know, Conal, Steve and father came from the Island over there?"

He moved, uneasily.

"No," he said, but uncertainly. "Who says so?"

"McNab. He did the chain trick here on Steve—scared him to death when he was by himself one afternoon. Seems he wasn't quite sure before, but Steve in his fright gave him all the proofs he wanted. And McNab's promised to use all he knows against father and Steve unless— Says he only put the troopers on to this cattle business to get you and Davey out of the way, though he had another score to work off against Mr. Cameron, too. But he says he always suspected . . . about Steve and father, and was only waiting for a chance to be sure of it to make me . . . make me marry him."

“By God——”

Conal spun from his chair. His oaths startled the birds from their night perches under the roof.

“He’ll not do that, Deirdre!” he cried. “Not while there’s life in me. Rot him—the crawler! To come here scaring the wits out of you. I’ll screw the last breath out of him, before——”

He made for the door. Deirdre went after him. She put her hand on his arm.

“You’ll do no good now, Conal,” she said. “You’re done yourself. Rest till morning. Then you can go to McNab. If he knows there’s a man about to stand by me, p’raps he won’t dare to do what he said.”

Conal jerked himself away from her.

“No, I’ll swear he won’t!”

“But you’ll do nothing at all if you go now,” she urged, “and I’ll have nobody without you. If you’ll only rest and sleep now and go in the morning, it’ll be better. You’ll be able to put the fear of God into McNab perhaps if he sees you strong and ready to make him do what you want.”

“Sleep?” He cursed under his breath. “Do you think there’s any sleep’ll come to me when I think that McNab—a filthy, damned swine like McNab—could come near you. I’d kill him—kill him if he touched a hair of your head.”

Her hands fell from him.

Conal’s face was distorted with rage. His words brought back memory of the shot that had almost killed Davey.

Conal guessed what her movement meant.

“Do you still believe”—he lifted her chin and looked into her eyes. “Do you still believe I fired that shot in the dark, Deirdre?”

“Did you, Conal?” she asked simply.

He turned from her with a gesture of disappointment.

"Oh, it was in anger, and when you weren't sure what you were doing, I know," she cried.

He opened the door.

"You're not going to-night?" she asked.

"No. You're right. It'll be better to wait till the morning," he said, with, for Conal, a strange quietude.

"I want to give the mare a rub down and a feed. Are there any bones for Sally? Throw a shakedown by the fire for me. I'll be in directly."

CHAPTER XLIV

CONAL was early astir. Deirdre heard him moving in the kitchen and then out of doors.

When he came in again, she had spread a cloth on the end of the table. Bacon and eggs were spluttering in a shallow pan on the hearth, a pot of porridge was ready for him, the kettle steaming.

Conal's face was sombre ; it was easy to see that he had not slept and that his mind was set to a plan of action. He ate without speaking, and got up to go.

Ginger was standing saddled by the door, her reins trailing beside her. She cropped the young grass that showed vivid green blades about the water barrel, and was nourished by the drips from the roof spouts and leakages from the barrel itself. Deirdre heard the click, click of Ginger's snaffle, the chirping of young birds under the roof, while Conal was eating. There was a solemnity, a wrapped-up purposefulness about him this morning ; she dared not ask him what he was going to do.

It was a fresh morning with frost in the air. A sparkling rime lay out on the grass in the paddocks and spread under the straggling shade of the sheds and the stables in crisp white patches. The sunshine splashed golden over the hills ; it lay in long shafts of purest brilliance on the paddocks and across the stable yard.

Conal went out of doors ; Deirdre followed him.

" Conal," she cried.

There was appeal in her voice.

He had gathered Ginger's reins in his hand. The mare turned her head, her great beautiful eyes on Deirdre.

"It's no good you're saying anything, Deirdre, telling me what to do and what not to do," Conal said roughly. "I've thought it all out. I know what's got to be done. I'll do it the best way I can."

He understood the prayer of her eyes.

"D'you think I want his blood on my hands?" he asked irritably. "But he's got to let you go, Deirdre. He's got to. There's no two ways about it, and if he says a word about the Schoolmaster or Steve, he'll have to reckon with me then—and the reckoning'll be a short one. That's the bargain I'm going to make with him. And I'll hold him responsible . . . if ever the story gets out. He'll pay all the same and I'll swear that—on the soul of my mother. Do you think my life's worth a straw to me? Do you think if it is a question of yours and Dan's life against McNab's, I can hesitate?"

He threw back his head with the old reckless movement.

"Not much! Lord, I'd take what was coming to me, cheerin', if I thought I'd put things right for the Schoolmaster and you. But if a knocking about'll do Thad any good instead, he's welcome to it. If I can get what I want out of him with a scarin' there'll be no need to go further.

"If I promise him on the reddest oath under the sun, and he's pretty sure I mean it—it'll do instead, perhaps. But I'm not taking any chances of his trickin' me. I can't afford to take chances, Deirdre. If I don't feel I've got him that way——"

She knew what he meant.

"It'll be a long day till you're back, Conal," she said.

He swung into his saddle, and went out to the road.

She watched the bay with her long easy stride and Conal swinging above her, till the trees hid them.

There was no doubt in her mind that when Conal let his tongue loose, unleashed the rage in him, McNab would do what he wanted. Conal was not known as "Fighting" Conal for nothing, and he was credited with being a man of his word. Reckless and dare-devil as he was, none knew better than McNab that he cared neither for God nor man when his blood was up, and that he would assuredly do as he said though the heavens fell.

Everybody knew the cringing coward McNab was. More than one of the men he had sold had threatened to wipe off old scores without leave or licence. A threat more or less might not have mattered, but each one intensified McNab's terror of the clutch of iron fingers in the night, the swift blade of a knife, the short bark of a pistol. It was easy to scare Steve with a clank of a chain, but the click of a pistol behind McNab turned him livid, a greenish hue spread on his face. Deirdre knew the frenzy of McNab's fear; but she knew, too, his shrewd brain.

While Conal was there he would dominate, convert him into the shaking, shrieking thing McNab became when the fear of violence, or a violent death, took possession of him; but afterwards, when Conal was gone, his brain would get to work—that cunning brain of his, quickened by a sense of his injuries and his spluttering, passionate fear and hate of the man who had humiliated and thwarted him. Deirdre wondered how it would fare with Conal then, whether McNab would outwit him. He would try. He was made that way—McNab—to scheme out of holes and corners. If Conal would have to reckon with him in the end, she realised that it would have been better to let the reckoning be now, before any further mischief was done. Yet her mind shuddered at

he thought. She knew that she had meant to delay it.

When Steve came shambling into the yard, blinking at the sunlight, she told him that Conal had returned and that he had gone down to the Black Bull, but would be back by the evening.

He exclaimed all the morning about Conal's coming, and had a thousand questions to ask. Where had Conal been? What had he been doing? Why was it he had gone off the way he did without saying a word to anybody? All of which Deirdre had not thought to ask. But they talked about Conal all the morning. Steve came in from cutting ferns for the cow-shed to ask if Conal was going to stay long. What was he going to do? Was he going up to the trial? Had she told him what McNab had said to them?

Deirdre wanted to be very busy all day so that the time would not seem long till Conal returned.

Steve with his questions made a little current of joyous excitement. Ordinarily the days were very still and empty. She swept and dusted, cooked their food, washed the dishes and sewed, with latterly only anxious thoughts to occupy her mind.

"How is he lookin'—Conal?" Steve asked, coming to the door when she was beating cream into butter in a delf bowl. He had come in as the idea for a new question occurred to him.

"Oh, well," she said, "but he'd been riding hard and was tired out. I think he's a bit thinner than he used to be, and he was awfully hungry."

"You gave him a drop of grog?" he asked, anxiously. Deirdre nodded.

"He was wet through. I thought he'd have his death of cold to-day."

"But he was all right this morning?"

" Oh, yes."

" Where did he come from ? "

She shook her head.

" Hadn't you better finish laying down the ferns," she said. " He may be back sooner than we think—and then you'll want to talk to him."

" Oh, yes ! " He shuffled out of doors again.

A moment later he put his head in the window. His shabby, drooping hat was outlined against the blank of sunshine. His face looked in at her, under the shadow of his hat, bright with a question.

" What did he go to the Wirree for, Deirdre ? "

" Oh ! " She hesitated. " He wanted to see McNab."

" Why ? "

Steve chewed the cud of a wondering thought.

" Why did he want to see McNab, Deirdre ? "

" He'll tell you when he comes," she said.

The bare kitchen had the musky, warm smell of newly-baked bread and of curdy, sweet buttermilk by the afternoon. Deirdre had made bread and new butter for Conal. She had prepared a good meal for him when he came home in the evening. After she had scrubbed the wooden table until it was of a weathered whiteness, and redded the bricks round the hearth, she looked about for other household tasks to work at so that the day would seem shorter.

It was late in the afternoon when she brushed her hair, twisted it up anew, put on a fresh frock, and sat down to sew until Conal came. Steve went out to the road every now and then to see if there were any signs of him.

Deirdre glanced at the shadows the trees cast. She dared not expect Conal before sunset. Her needle flew in and out of a piece of stiff unbleached linen Mrs. Cameron had given her some time ago. She thought of

her when she was afraid to think of Conal and what was happening in Wirreeford.

The sun sank behind the distant line of hills, and the jackasses on the high branches of a tree by the road laughed their good-night to the sun. She could not restrain her impatience any longer, and went to the road. Her eyes strained to see Conal and his bay horse, forging out of the gloom that was beginning to gather amongst the trees, hanging mysterious, impalpable veils across the ends of the track where the trees met over it, and it dwindled into a wavering thread.

She lay down by the roadside, and pressed her ear to the earth to listen for the sound of hoof-beats, but only the forest murmurs came to her, the moan of the wind in the valleys, the leafy murmur of the trees, the creaking of broken and swaying branches, the faint calling of birds, all confused and mingled in a vague wave of sound.

The last hoot hoot of the jackasses in the misty depths of the hills drifted across the quiet evening air. The cows had gathered against the paddock fence and were lowing plaintively for the evening milking.

Deirdre drove them into the yard and milked. When she had taken the pails indoors, she went again to the road, gazed down into the darkness that had now gathered over the track, and listened for the rapid beat of hoofs on the road.

A glimmer of light in the shanty windows told Deirdre that Steve had lighted up. He came to the door.

"Conal's late, Deirdre?" he called.

"Yes," she replied.

She stood there quite still staring down the road.

"What do you think can have kept him?"

Steve had come out and was standing beside her.

Her face was very wan to his old eyes ; her dark hair blew in tendrils about it.

“ I—don’t know ! ”

She saw the anxiety start in his eyes.

“ Oh, it’s all right ! ” She took his arm and they went towards the house again.

“ He’ll be having a game of cards with the boys. It’s too soon to expect him, that’s all. We’ll go in and have supper.”

She spread the table and put out the hot dinner she had made for Conal. Steve’s hunger increased at the savoury smell of it, and because it was later than they usually had their meal, he ate steadily and with ready relish. Deirdre sat down at the table with him.

“ Aren’t you going to have anything ? ” he asked when he saw that she was not eating.

“ I’ll wait for Conal,” she said.

Steve dozed in his chair afterwards. The night that closed in on the forest was of a soft, thick darkness. Deirdre stood in the doorway looking out into it for a while. Not a star hung its silver lamp over the hills. The wind crept with slow, uncertain breaths about the shanty. She shut the door.

She carried her work-basket, with the socks that she had been mending the night before, to the table. But she could not work ; her hands would not stir. She sat listening, listening, listening.

Steve had taken out his pipe and sucked it, nodding in his chair by the fire. His teeth relaxed their grip as he dozed ; the pipe fell on the floor. Deirdre started to her feet as the sound broke the stillness. It wakened him too. He stared stupidly about him with sleep-dazed eyes.

“ What’s that ? ” he asked. “ Has Conal come yet ? ”

"No," she said, picking up the pipe. "Perhaps you'd better not wait up for him."

"Yes! Yes!" he muttered testily. "Of course I'll wait."

He sank back into his chair and presently was sleeping again.

Deirdre went back to the table and sat there staring before her, listening fixedly. Hour after hour went by.

A quick breath crossed her lips; she ran to the door and threw it open.

A gust of wind rushed into the room, and it brought the sound of a horse on the road. She slammed the door and went back to the hearth, raked the embers and pulled back the log so that it fell with a shower of sparks and the flames leapt up over the new wood. She moved the pots with Conal's dinner in them nearer the fire, and opening the door again, stood by it waiting.

Ginger swung round the corner, and Conal on her. He was riding low, huddled against her neck. The way he dropped from the saddle drove the breath from Deirdre's body.

He threw out his arms and staggered forward. He would have fallen if she had not been there to hold him. She dragged him indoors leaning against her.

"Steve—Steve!" she called.

The old man was beside her in an instant.

Conal had fallen, his legs crumpling up under him. There was a stain of blood on his clothes.

Deirdre tore them from the place where the blood welled. She put the brandy Steve brought to Conal's lips, and sent Steve for water and rags, telling him where to find the soft scraps she kept together for burns or cuts.

"It's like the wound Davey had," Steve cried, when he saw the way the flesh was ploughed up on Conal's breast, "only nearer the heart."

Conal moaned as the cold water struck him. A damp sweat lay on his forehead.

"It's all up—I'm done for," he muttered. "Give me—your hand, Deirdre—never—never thought I'd reach you—but I couldn't die—there—in the dark—down by the creek."

His voice failed.

"Don't try to talk, Conal dear," she begged. "You'll be all right if you keep quiet—lie still—Davey was."

But there was a greyness about Conal's face, a dimness that Davey's had not had.

"Davey?" he muttered. "Davey——"

His eyes opened; they were the wild, bright eyes, reckless and challenging, of Fighting Conal.

"You—believe—I shot Davey?"

"No." Deirdre bent over him, her breath coming sobbingly. "I don't believe it now, Conal. The same hands that did this to you—did it to Davey, too——"

"A damn', whispering slug in the dark!" he gasped. "It was by the culvert over the creek too—from the cover of the trees—And I know whose hand it was—I saw the slinking hound. By God—why did I let him off? Why did I think I'd got him tight enough."

He sank back against her arm with a spasm of pain. She put the spirit to his lips.

"If only I'd choked—the life out of him, I could die easy. But the mare bolted—I couldn't get her back to him. The lying cur! The bargain was made—I thought I'd got him—that he'd 've made over his last penny to me. Someone kept me talking outside the Bull—it was that kid minds his horses—saying that Ginger'd gone lame—and the next thing was a shot from the creek and McNab scuttling among the trees. Paugh!" he moved impatiently, "Why didn't I do for him while I had the chance."

Superhuman strength animating him for a moment he struggled up, his swart face stiffening, his eyes flashing.

"I can! I'm alive yet—I can, Deirdre."

He swayed and she caught him, breaking the shock of his fall backwards. Blood welled from the open wound; the wet pads had staunched the flow for a moment. Steve brought more water. She dipped fresh linen and rags in it and bound them into place. Conal lay heavy and still.

She bent over him; her eyes turned questioningly to Steve.

She lifted Conal's head on to her knees. The silence was unbroken.

"Conal," she whispered as though she were calling him, "Conal!"

"That you, Deirdre?" he asked huskily, but he did not open his eyes. "If—if you could—kiss me—it's so hard to go—feeling you near—and that you don't care for me at all. If only I hadn't failed you—this time! If only— But it was because of you I didn't want to—kill him—unless—unless it was necessary. It seemed all right—the other way—You won't think badly of me, Deirdre?"

"No, no, Conal dear, but don't try to talk now."

"I've been hard on you—Deirdre—But you won't think ill of me. It's the way men are made—and I didn't understand how it was with you—and Davey—not till that night in the hut. If I hadn't brought trouble between you—you might forgive me."

"Conal, Conal," Deirdre sobbed, the tears streaming over her face. "You're dear to me, yourself—dear in your own way. Haven't you always been—and I haven't been good to you—always. My heart's breaking to hear you talk like this."

She bent over and kissed him.

Conal opened his eyes. The mellow light of serene happiness had drifted into them. They rested on her face as though they were loath to leave it. His long fingers were knotted about her hands.

"I'm happier than ever I was in my life, Deirdre, darling," he whispered. She had to stoop over him to catch the words on his lips, so faint and hoarsely uttered they were, as though the thoughts left him without his lips having power to form them. "Never expected to put my head on your knees—hold your hand—like this. It would never have happened, if I'd lived, so it's good to die. You'll look after Ginger—'ginger for pluck'—dear old devil—never 've got here—but for her. And Sally—good old Sally—not a cattle mong' like her—countryside."

The ghost of a smile flitted over his lips.

"If only——"

Recollection of McNab came, banishing the peaceful happiness from his face. His eyes blazed. There was a momentary struggle for breath and he fell back fighting for life. Then, on a long sigh, he was still.

Deirdre tried the brandy again. She called him. She felt for his heart. His head was very heavy on her knees. She stared down on the finely chiselled features, so still, upraised before her. Her tears rained over them. The quiet was unbroken but for Steve's crying like a child.

Then Sally, lying crouched against the door of the hut, lifted her voice in a long, mournful howl that told the shrouded hills and all the creatures of them that the soul of her master, Long Conal—Conal, the Fighter—had passed on.

CHAPTER XLV

DEIRDRE knew that McNab would not come near Steve's while the dead body of Conal lay there. In the morning, she saddled the chestnut and rode into Wirreeford.

"It was you shot Conal and I'm going to let all the countryside know it," she said, facing McNab in the reeking parlour of the Black Bull.

"And who do y' think will believe you?" McNab sidled up to her, his eyes kindling.

"Everybody who knows you."

"And they'll say to you: 'How do y' know?' 'What proof have you got, Deirdre?' Nobody'll want to go agen Thad McNab lest they're sure—and nobody'll want to be gettin' up and givin' evidence against McNab lest they're sure they're comin' out on the right side of the business."

"Proof? there's proof enough!"

Deirdre's voice rang clear, though her heart was beginning to quail. She knew that what he said was true. She had come with the idea of using Conal's death as a weapon against McNab; but it had suddenly become and useless in her hands.

"Now look here, my dear, it's no use bein' nasty," McNab said. "You know and I know, there's no man in the Wirree would go against me 'less he was pretty sure of getting somebody stronger than himself to back him. Well, is he going to get anybody? That's the question."

Deirdre thought of M'Laughlin, sodden with drink,

and as much McNab's creature as any other man in the Wirree.

McNab chuckled, though there was a nervous edge to his voice.

"There's Sergeant M'Laughlin, of course, he's police officer for the district. You can tell him your story if you like. But he's a hard-headed man, M'Laughlin. He'll want proofs. And then don't forget I've still the trump card up me sleeve."

Her immobility maddened him.

"See here, Deirdre," he said, shaking with rage, "I've been patient with you till now, and I'm not a patient man. Y' may not 've liked the ways of my love-makin', but they're my ways. Either you take my terms or you leave them. And if you send any more jackanapes to me y'll find them served as was Conal.

"Maybe y're waitin' and hopin' young Davey 'll come overland," he rasped on, "to—to help you. Don't let him get in my way again, Deirdre. Don't let him. If he gets in my way, he'll have to get out of it."

"Or you will have to get out of his way!"

Deirdre's eyes flashed into his. She saw the mean cunning soul in them. She knew that it would be Davey who would get out, that there was no fighting McNab. Davey would die as Conal had died, of a shot in the dark, or a death-dealing stab in the back.

McNab realised that she had measured his chances against Davey Cameron, Davey's chances against him, in that moment, for all her proud look.

"There's a boat just in the Port—takin' on some cattle—brought news from Melbourne," he said. "Davey's acquitted. So is the Schoolmaster. Jury didn't find there was evidence enough to convict. They'll be coming along by the *Albatross*. She's due in a couple of days. Johnson, Cameron's man, brought word. If

you don't marry me—if y're not Mrs. McNab before that boat gets in—it can take y'r father and Steve along with it. It goes right on to Hobart Town after calling here."

Deirdre stumbled out of the room. McNab did not follow her. He knew that she would not fight any more.

He watched her swing into her saddle and ride out along the flat, dun-coloured road to the hills. Mrs. Mary Ann, driving a string of snow-white geese along the green ledges of the wayside, called to her, but Deirdre fled on, past the cottage that the Schoolmaster and she had lived in, past the out-croppings of gorse beginning to bud goldenly on the edge of the plains.

And McNab chuckled softly, rubbing his hands together.

CHAPTER XLVI

THE *Albatross* was in.

Just before midday, carts and carry-alls had clattered along the road to the Port. Deirdre, riding down from the hills at dawn, had seen the schooner on the dim shining screen of sea and sky. There was no wind, and like a great white bird she hovered outside the bar, waiting for the wind and tide to carry her into the quiet waters of the inlet.

It was not until midday that a breeze sprang up, sending white, curled breakers high over the bar, and the *Albatross* on the crest of them came sailing into the harbour. She rode, furling her sails, to the log-wood wharf on its further side. A crowd had gathered to meet her, and it was early afternoon before the vehicles began to rattle back along the road to the hills and Wirreeford. Deirdre stood at the window of McNab's parlour, behind the curtains that had been hung up in her honour, watching them.

She saw none of the curious looks and gestures that went her way, the pitiful glances that covered her. For the news of the Port that morning beat any the boat had brought. Those who saw the dim white face of the girl at the window, and her shadowy eyes, knew that she was Thad McNab's wife. They knew that McNab had driven Deirdre Farrel into the Port before any of them were astir and that a clergyman had married them in the church there.

"Why did she do it? What could have made her," they asked each other.

"It wasn't for love of his beautiful face, be sure," snarled Salt Watson.

"It's hard on the Schoolmaster. He'll not know of it yet," somebody else said.

Deirdre neither heard nor saw them. She was watching for Davey and Dan to pass. She had seen Mrs. Ross and Jessie go by to the Port in Cameron's double-seated buggy. She thought they would ride together to the hills in that, Davey and her father.

If they knew, they would stop at the Black Bull; if no one had told them they would go on, she had decided. They would wonder why she was not on the wharf when the boat got in, to meet them. But McNab would not have that. He would not lose sight of her. Besides she did not want to meet the eyes of the men and women who would be there, and hear what they had to say.

She was cut off from the world as she stood at the window of McNab's house. Her mind was too utterly weary to reason further. As she watched and waited a sense of bleak desolation closed in on her. Her eyes ached for sight of the Schoolmaster's form against the clear sky, although she knew she would hardly see it above the buggy and among other people.

She asked herself what he would do when he found that she was not waiting for him at Steve's—what he would think when he found the letter that was lying for him there.

Steve would have to read it for him. It would break his heart, the letter that she had wept and prayed over; but it was better that his heart should break than that he should go to the Island again. And Steve, poor old Steve, would die in peace some day and be put to rest where they had put Conal. A magistrate—assisted in a fashion by M'Laughlin and a jury—had

duly investigated and found that his tragic death was an impenetrable mystery. An "open verdict," they called the finding.

Conal's resting place was on a sunny hillside under a blossoming white gum in which the bees hummed drowsily in the spring time and through which the green parrots flashed all the year. It was good to think that Steve would draw his last breath in freedom, and then sleep there under the blue sky. But for her, there would be no freedom, no open spaces. Life had become a prison from which there was only one gate—Death; and that she would not be able to open because she was a hostage for other lives. Dan's, and Steve's—perhaps Davey's.

Cameron's buggy rounded a turn in the road.

Mrs. Ross and Jessie were in it, and there was a man's figure beside their's—only one though.

The horse, moving at her slow, steady jog-trot, drew nearer.

Deirdre saw clearly the man who was driving. It was Davey. The Schoolmaster was not with him.

A panic seized her. She flew out to the road, the horse stopped automatically.

"Where's father?" she cried.

Davey stared at her. He scarcely knew her—this wild, white-faced creature with burning eyes and colourless lips.

"Hasn't he come?" she asked.

"No," he said slowly.

He got down from the buggy. His heart ached at the sight of her. He hardly knew how to speak. He moved to take her hands.

She shrank from him.

"Why didn't he come?"

"Because . . . Oh, Deirdre, it breaks my heart to tell you," he broke out. "Don't look at me like that. I did

all I could, but it was no good. Some cursed brute gave information——”

“Oh,” she whispered. “It was that then!”

And after a moment:

“They took him again—for being at large before the expiration of . . . sentence!”

“Yes.”

His eyes were all tenderness and pity for her.

“When, Davey?”

“Just before we were leaving, four days ago. Don’t look like that, Deirdre! I won’t leave a stone unturned to get him back. And I promised him that we——”

She laughed, a strange, cracking little laugh.

“Deirdre!”

He was perplexed and hurt.

“Don’t come near me!”

She turned away from him and ran into the house under the swinging sign of the black bull with red-rimmed eyes.

Davey attempted to follow her. He saw McNab in the doorway.

“What the hell’s she doing there?” he muttered.

Mrs. Ross and Jessie eyed each other anxiously. They did not speak for a minute. Then the elder woman said nervously, uncertainly:

“P’raps . . . p’raps she came down with Steve to meet the Schoolmaster. But we’d better be going on, Davey. Don’t risk any trouble with Thad McNab to-day. Your mother’s waiting eagerly for you. You’re her only thought now. All she has got.”

Davey climbed into the buggy again. His face was sombre. He had not got over the shock of his father’s death and Deirdre’s manner wounded and bewildered him. He thought that she was distraught with agony and disappointment on the Schoolmaster’s account.

He had imagined how tenderly he would tell her what had happened, and comfort her. Now to find her at the Black Bull, not at Steve's, where he had thought she would be, and Mrs. Ross and Jessie beside him, when he wanted to fold her in his arms and assure her that he would never rest until Dan was with them again! He swore at every jolt and jar on the road to relieve his impatience.

It was Mrs. Ross who said to Mary Cameron, taking her aside when mother and son had met, and Davey was turning Bess into the paddock again:

"It's true what we heard about Deirdre Farrel going to marry McNab. She was married to him this morning. You'd better break the news to Davey. He doesn't know yet. I dursn't tell him for fear he'd go to McNab. I wanted to bring him safe to you. Jessie and I'll go home now. No doubt you'll like to have the house to yourself, but if you want anything, or there's anything we can do for you——"

"We're always glad to do anything for you, Mrs. Cameron, dear," Jessie said softly.

"It's a queer, heartless girl Deirdre is, to play fast and loose with the love of a fine fellow like Davey," Mrs. Ross said, when Jess was outside setting their bundles and baskets into the cart.

"Oh, she wouldn't do that—Deirdre," Mrs. Cameron replied. "It's something dreadful that's driven her to it."

"Yes—I suppose it is," Mrs. Ross sighed. "Poor child. Perhaps I'm spiteful about it, Mary. But maybe now that she is out of the way, Davey may think of my Jessie again."

Davey's mother smiled sadly.

"I'd be sorry for any woman he married but Deirdre, for she has the whole of him—heart and soul," she said.

"Oh well, it's a pity!" Mrs. Ross kissed her good-bye. "Jess had better make up her mind to have Buddy Morrison, then, and that's what I've been telling her this long time. He's a good lad, very fond of her, and been wanting to marry her for the last five years."

When Jess and her mother had gone, driving off in their high, jolting buggy, Davey and Mrs. Cameron went indoors together.

He had aged considerably since she last saw him. It was a stern, strange face to her, this her boy's. There were sorrow, self-repression, a bitter realisation of life and what it means in heartache and disappointment, in his expression; something of power and assurance too.

She was wondering how she could tell him, covering him with tender, pitiful glances, and praying that he would not leave her, that no hurt might come to him, when he asked suddenly:

"Have you seen anything of Deirdre, mother?"

He had been moving restlessly about the room, lifting things from their place on the mantelpiece and putting them back again.

She called him to her and, putting her hands on his head, told him what Mrs. Ross had said.

Davey's face hardened and whitened slowly. He put her hands away from him and wheeled unsteadily from the room. She heard him go across the yard, and saw him stumbling up the narrow track to the trees on the far side of the hill.

CHAPTER XLVII

MRS. CAMERON was feeding her chickens when she thought she heard someone calling. She listened, and decided that it was only a whispering of wind in the trees that had caught her ear.

The mild light of the evening lingered about her. Her eyes lay on the hill that rose with a gentle slope beyond the yard, the barns and stable, and a score of low-built brushwood sheds. Mists were beginning to gather among the trees that fringed the top on either side. Davey had gone up among those trees.

The sound of her name called faintly again disturbed her. She looked down towards the road that wound uphill out of the forest. It was wraith-like in the twilight, the long white gate that barred it from the paddock about the house, growing dim. The gum saplings of two or three years' growth, with their powdery-grey leaves pressing on the far side of the fence behind the barn, shivered as the surface of still water shivers when something stirs beneath it. Her eyes were directed towards the centre of the almost imperceptible movement.

Someone called her, faintly, whisperingly.

Going towards the fence, she saw a wan face and wide eyes among the leaves. The lines of a long, dark dress went off into the shadows among the trees.

"Deirdre," she cried.

The girl came towards her. Her dress was draggled and torn. There was a red line on her cheek where a broken branch had caught and scratched it.

"Where's Davey?" she asked.

"Deirdre, what has happened?" Mrs. Cameron recognised a tragic urgency in her face. "Come in, you're exhausted. You don't mean to say you've walked from the Wirree."

She took her hand and led her into the kitchen. The fire was sending long ruddy beams of light over the bricked floor, glimmering on the rows of polished metal covers on the walls, and the crockery on the wooden dresser at the far end of the room. It was very homely and peaceful, Mrs. Cameron's kitchen. She pushed Deirdre gently into the big arm-chair by the fire.

"Sit there, dearie, till I get you a hot drink," she said.

Deirdre sat very still, gazing before her.

"It's this marriage with McNab is too much for her," Mrs. Cameron thought.

"Oh, child, why did you do it? What could have driven you to it?" she asked.

The shadow of a slow and subtle smile crept for a moment about Deirdre's lips and vanished again.

"If only you'd have told me your trouble," Mrs. Cameron cried. "I might have been able to help you."

"Oh no, you wouldn't," Deirdre said.

"You couldn't have married McNab for any reason of choice." Mrs. Cameron was torn between grief, bewilderment and compassion. "Davey is breaking his heart about it, out on the hills somewhere, now. I had to tell him when he came in, for fear— What's to be done about it, Deirdre? Oh, I'm not wanting to blame you. You did it for a good reason, I'm sure, and you love Davey. It's hard on you, Deirdre. You do love him?"

"Yes," Deirdre said slowly.

Mrs. Cameron knelt beside the chair. Her hands trembled on the girl's arm.

"Don't touch me," Deirdre gasped, moving out of

the reach of her hands. "Don't touch me," she whispered again, eyeing her strangely.

"Davey—I'm afraid what he'll do if he sees you" . . . Mrs. Cameron hesitated.

Deirdre sprang out of the chair, her eyes blazing.

"Davey! Davey! It's all Davey with you!" she cried. "You sacrificed father to him. You sent him to that trial. I know now. And Davey—why couldn't he have gone to gaol instead? He's young and strong and it wouldn't have mattered so much to him. He's got all his life before him. But father—hadn't he done enough for you? Hasn't he given his eyes for you? Hasn't he worshipped you all these years? I've seen it since I was a child. And is this all you could do for him, send him to the Law Courts to get Davey off, knowing that it would be worse than death to him to have to go to prison again? Oh, you knew what he'd have to suffer in Davey's place. . . ."

Mrs. Cameron put her hands over her face.

"You knew he couldn't afford to come under the notice of the law," Deirdre said. "But I shouldn't talk like this——"

Her voice trailed wearily.

"Only—I had to choose between father and Davey. McNab knows all the old story. You do, I know. Steve told me. McNab scared the wits out of Steve one day when he was by himself and got all the proofs he wanted, though he seems to have had the facts—most of them, anyway—before. Then he told me—what being at large before the expiration of sentence meant, and what his information would do if he used it, about father, when the trial was on. He said that he wouldn't use it if I'd marry him."

Mrs. Cameron stared at her.

Deirdre went on, her voice dragging as if she could scarcely put into words the pain and trouble of her mind.

"I couldn't let father suffer any more. I couldn't bear to think what it would be for him to go back there, to the Island," she said. "He, blind . . . and loving me so . . . and you—and both of us willing to sacrifice him to Davey. I could see him going over there, hurt and alone, in the dark, the dear, great, gentle heart of him crying . . . crying for those he loved to be near him, to hear the sound of their voices, to touch their hands. I couldn't endure it. Oh, I couldn't."

Her head dropped.

"He has made sacrifices all his life. His eyes for you——"

"Don't say that, Deirdre!"

"It's the truth," the girl said fiercely. "That night of the fires he saw the branch falling. It would have hit you if he had not put up his arm, and it came down on him—on his face—all the red-hot embers. . . ."

Mrs. Cameron uttered a low cry.

"And now at the end of his days you took this last scrap of freedom from him. But I wouldn't have it. I knew that the time had come for somebody to do something for him."

There was a few moments' silence.

"Only after all"—a weary bitterness surged in her voice—"it was no good. McNab was too clever for me. He trapped me—and sold father all the same—and Steve, poor old Stevie, too. M'Laughlin took him down to the Port this afternoon. I heard him crying like a baby. When I asked McNab why he had broken his word to me, he said"—a little sick laughter struggled from her—"that, blind as father was, he knew he'd have to reckon with him for having taken me, if he ever came back to the Wirree."

She sank back in the chair, shivering and sobbing.

Mrs. Cameron leant towards her.

"Don't touch me!" Deirdre shrank from her. "I haven't told you all yet. McNab locked me in a room when he knew that I knew what he'd done. It was when he came to me there and called me his wife—I killed him."

Mrs. Cameron fell back from her.

"Oh, I didn't mean to kill him," the girl cried distractedly. "He came near me. I told him not to, but he did. He talked of his rights. I hit at him . . . to keep him away from me . . . with something that was lying on the table. I don't know what it was, but it was heavy—and he fell down."

"I knew he was dead by the way he lay there, without moving—and then I ran out of the room and came here. Oh, I didn't mean to do it—but I'm not sorry it's done—that he is dead and can do no more harm to any of us. He killed Conal. And it was he that shot at Davey. He would have again, too. He was afraid of Davey—what he would do . . . when he found out about father and me."

She was sobbing breathlessly; her hands went out before her with a desperate, despairing gesture. She moved towards the door.

"Where are you going? What are you going to do, Deirdre?"

Mrs. Cameron followed her.

"I don't know!" The girl stood quivering by the doorpost. "Only I must go. They may come from the Wirree and find me here. And I don't want to be hanged—that's what they do with people who have done what I've done, isn't it? I want to go. Davey mustn't see me. It's no good. No good! There would be the great gulf between us always . . . and as long as I lived—to the day of my death—I'd be on the other side of it, with my arms out to him. Oh, you mustn't

keep me. Can't you see it's best that I should go . . . now . . . like this, before . . ."

"You're not thinking of doing any harm to yourself, Deirdre?"

The anguished eyes of the woman beside her reached the girl through the maze and terror of her thoughts. They calmed the tumult within her.

"The Long Gully," she said simply, wearily, "the mists are so deep in it to-night, and there would be no waking in the morning."

Mrs. Cameron took her hand.

"You say I've never done anything for your father, Deirdre. I want to do something for him now. Come back and listen to me for a moment."

She led the girl back to the chair, and forced her into it.

"But they'll be coming for me soon," Deirdre cried fretfully, looking back at the door.

She hardly heard what Mrs. Cameron was saying for awhile. Her tired, bright eyes wandered restlessly up and down the room. The pain in her head prevented her thinking.

"Deirdre darling," Mrs. Cameron said, her voice trembling, "there's not a man or woman in the country would not say you were justified. And no woman is better able to understand than I am. I'm not afraid for you . . . and there's no one I'd rather have for Davey's wife than you. You were willing to sacrifice yourself. But when treachery had been proved against you, there was that within you would not let evil come near you."

"Do you mean . . . you'd be satisfied for Davey to have me?" Deirdre asked.

"Yes."

Mrs. Cameron's eyes were on hers.

"You'd not be throwing it up at me that I . . . that I did this?" Deirdre inquired. "And that father——"

"No." Mrs. Cameron's voice was very low. "Because if I had been served as your father was—I'd have been a convict too."

In the shock of what she had said, Deirdre forgot her own trouble.

"You?" she whispered.

"That's what I wanted to tell you . . . it's been locked in my heart so long . . . and nobody else knows," Mrs. Cameron said. "It's because I think it may help you, Deirdre, now that your soul is in the deep waters, I want you to know . . . that something like what has happened to you happened to me, long ago. Only I had less excuse."

Her face was torn with grief; she turned from the girl, overwhelmed by the flood-tide of dark memories.

"Oh, I can't think of it without all the agony again," she cried.

And after a moment, continued:

"I didn't want to bring shame on my people by having it known . . . I had been the cause of death to a man . . . but the weight was on my soul. I had heard of people escaping public trial by condemning themselves to transportation. It was the only way I could have any peace of mind, I thought—taking on myself the punishment other women had got for doing what I did. But it was never as bad for me as for them. Davey's father saw me on the wharf among the emigrant women, and he wanted to marry me. There was a Government bounty—thirty pounds I think it was—given to married couples coming to the colony, and he wanted the money to begin with in the new country. I told him why I was going out, and he was willing to take me. There were terrible days:

of fear among all the rough people I found myself with . . . till he came. I was grateful to him, and swore to be a good and faithful wife to him.

"I've not spoken of this since then, Deirdre. I'm telling you because I want you not to throw your life away—not to waste it. I know I was wrong. There was this difference between what you did and what I did. I was not in a corner, fighting for my life as you were. I did not mean to take life. I did not mean to. It was an accident, really. Right was on my side, but I was angry, or the accident would never have happened. I have suffered from knowing that. All these years have made little difference. That's why I was always wanting to help convicts and prisoners in the old days—and it angered Davey's father so. I felt that they were suffering what I ought to have been suffering too. . .

"But with you it was different. Your own instinct tells you the difference. It does not accuse you. No one else will, either. And there's your father to think of. It would take the last gleam of happiness from him to know you had ended your own life, Deirdre. And there's Davey and me to love you and care for you, always."

Deirdre stared at her; then the tears came; she cried quietly.

Mrs. Cameron put her arms round her. She comforted her with tender little murmurings. Deirdre raised her head, and put her off from her, gazing into her face with drenched eyes.

"I understand ever so much better now," she said. And a moment later: "Have I been mad with fright? What'll I do? My head aches so, I scarcely know what I am saying. I can't think. What shall I do? What is going to happen to me?"

"There's no jury in the country that would not

acquit you," Mrs. Cameron said. "McNab was well known. Oh, people were afraid of him, but they will speak now. You're young and beautiful, and if your story is not a justification—there's no God watching over the world."

"But what will Davey think of me?" Deirdre cried. "I'm afraid to see him—I wanted to, when I came here—but I'm afraid now. I thought it would be to say good-bye. They'll be coming for me soon, too. Oh, I'll go now, Mrs. Cameron. If Davey looked at my hands, and knew what they had done——"

Conflicting thoughts, whipping each other, were driving her like a leaf, first one way and then the other.

There was a heavy step on the threshold. Davey's figure loomed against the doorway.

Coming in from the light, it was a few minutes before his eyes accustomed to the gloom, saw that there was someone with his mother.

He stared at Deirdre as though they were ghosts who were meeting after death, beyond the world. She shrank from the stare of his eyes, putting up her arms to hide her face, with a little pitiful cry. She moved along the wall towards the door as if to go out and escape them.

"Davey! Davey! Don't let her go," Mrs. Cameron cried.

Although his eyes followed her, and he seemed to guess her intention, he did not stir.

"Davey," Mrs. Cameron cried, a pang in her heart like the blade of a knife. "She has killed McNab, and is going to her death because of it."

Deirdre stood still. Her arms dropped from her face. She threw back her head, her eyes met his unflinchingly.

"You—you have killed him?"

His voice was harsh with the effort to speak.

"Yes," she said.

A gust of passion rushed over him. It flooded him with a vigour, and exultation that transformed him.

He strode towards her. His arms imprisoned her. He held her, and kissed her with the hungry kiss of a lover, long denied.

"Deirdre, Deirdre!" he sobbed. "That you should have—— It was for me to do—that. I meant to, to-night. Do you think I could have lived . . . breathed . . . been sane, while you . . . were near him?"

He crushed her in his arms again. They sobbed together childishly.

Mrs. Cameron went into the other room—her sitting-room with its shiny black horse-hair furniture, and the cupboard in which her spinning wheel had stood since the days of Donald Cameron's greatness. The beloved blue vase that she had saved from the fire was still on the chiffonier. She sat in the room she had been so proud of, a long time, her hands clasped in her lap, reviewing her memories.

They came in straggling lines and phalanxes—memories of her youth, of an old sad time, of her voyage across the seas beside Donald Cameron, of their journey into the hills, of the days of struggle and toil and domestic tranquillity that had given her a son, of her first fear and loneliness in the silent world of the trees, and of the gaunt men who had come to her out of them.

The complexities of human emotion were a mystery and a distress to her. She had the momentary vision of a prison yard, its grim walls, trains of sullen men in grimy grey and yellow clothes, all of the same pattern, and of one who walked among them, wearily, a little uncertainly, singing faintly, as she had often heard him singing on the hill roads. Her eyes went down the slope of the hill to the spot under the light-leaved trees where Donald Cameron had been laid to rest, her heart crying an

assurance of loyalty and fidelity to the yoke mate. They had set a seed in the country that would bear fruit in the union of the two in the next room, she knew. All the labour of their pioneering had not been in vain. Donald Cameron had done what he set out to do, though his last days had been darkened with disappointment, the bitter sense of disgrace and the futility of all his long years of toil. But his name would go on, she realised, and his children's children would talk with pride of their grandfather who had come from the old country, a poor man, and had made a great name for himself in the new land. Of the spiritual undertow which bound Deirdre and Davey, she could not think. That was entwined with the subtle, inexplicable currents of her own soul. She had turned her face from them, shut her eyes and ears to the sight and sound of them. She had never allowed herself to recognise their existence even; yet she knew that they were there, rushing on, silently, irresistibly into eternity.

A vision of the prison yard came again, shaping itself slowly, vaguely, and with it a sound of chains, the harsh voices of warders and gaolers. Her thoughts went back to the lovers in the other room.

She folded her hands with a little passionate gesture; the light of her whole soul shone in her eyes.

"Oh God," she whispered breathlessly, "we broke the earth, we sowed the seed. Let theirs be the harvest—the joy of life and the fullness thereof."

CHAPTER XLVIII

FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER

A BOY pushed the bracken and ferny grey and green wattle sprays from before a lichen-grown wooden cross. He was a sturdy youngster, with an eager, sensitive face, and dropped on one knee beside the mound the parted ferns and branches revealed, to read the inscription on the cross.

The path that wound uphill through the trees behind him was an old one, overgrown with mosses. Scraps of bark and sear leaves were matted across it. The weathered, rambling homestead of Ayrmuir was just visible through the trees, and a cornfield waving down the slope of the hill showed golden through a gap in the waving leafage. Donald Cameron had marked the place long before, and said that there, where the wagon had come to a standstill, he must be laid to rest. And it was within memory of the boy that his grandmother, Mary Cameron, had been laid beside him.

A voice floating down the hillside from the house called :

“ Dan ! Dan ! ”

Deirdre came down the path towards him, an older, graver Deirdre, with peace in her deep-welled eyes, though an undefinable shadow rested on her face.

“ Here you are, dear ! ” she said. “ It’ll be time to be getting ready soon. Mick has the horses in—and your father won’t like to be kept waiting. There was so much

I wanted to say to you, too, before you go up to this big school. It won't be a bit like going to the school down here or doing Latin with me—going to the Grammar School, Dan."

"No, of course, mother."

"I wonder sometimes if I've been wrong to keep you so much with me," she said wistfully. "You had to be told all the terrible old story. I told you myself, because I wanted you to understand."

"Mother!" There were reverence and adoration in his eyes as they rested on her.

"You're sure—sure, you don't feel strange about your mother, Dan?" she asked. "A jury acquitted me, but I know I was right myself. There was nothing else to do."

She was quivering to the shock of startled memories.

"I can't feel that I could have done anything else than I did," she cried passionately, "but I can't forget, Dan. The horror of it all shadows me still—it always will."

The boy slipped his arms through hers and pressed against her.

"Whenever I read in history or a story of people who had to do terrible things for those they loved, I think: 'Like my mother!' But no one I've ever read, or heard of, was like you," he said shyly.

"Dan!"

A smile of melting, eager tenderness suffused her eyes.

As they turned away he looked back at the grave under the trees.

"I thought I'd like to say good-bye to them," he said. "They were pioneers, weren't they, grandfather and grandmother? Makes me feel like being a bit of history myself, to think that my grandfather and grandmother were pioneers. I was saying to myself just now: 'They

did so much against such big odds, what a lot I ought to be able to do with everything made easy for me."

"I wish your father and mother were down here, too," he added.

"I never knew my mother, Dan," Deirdre said dreamily. "You know, I've told you all about that. She died when I was born—and it was because I was such a wailing baby, that my father called me Deirdre—Deirdre of the griefs. And he—lies over there in the Island."

"I remember him," the boy said eagerly, his voice hushed. "When I was a little kid, we went, you, and I, and father, to see him, didn't we? And I sort of remember a tall, thin man who had white hair—quite white hair, and was blind; he was always singing, so as you could scarcely hear him, and once he said suddenly when I was on his knee, don't you remember: 'He's got her eyes, Deirdre?'"

"Yes." Deirdre murmured, the pain in her eyes deepening.

"I've wondered . . . I've often wondered what he meant, mother. How could he know what my eyes were like. He was blind."

"He meant your grandmother—Mary Cameron, Dan. He used to say she had twilight eyes; and that the light of them pierced his darkness," Deirdre said.

The boy puzzled over that.

"I remember, she said to me once," he said, thoughtfully. "'You ought to be a great man, Dan, because four great nations have gone to the making of you.' I didn't know what she meant at first. Then she told me that my four grandparents were English, Irish, Scottish and Welsh. 'They have quarrelled and fought among themselves, but you are a gathering of them in a new country, Dan,' she said. 'There will be a great future for the nation that comes of you and the boys and girls

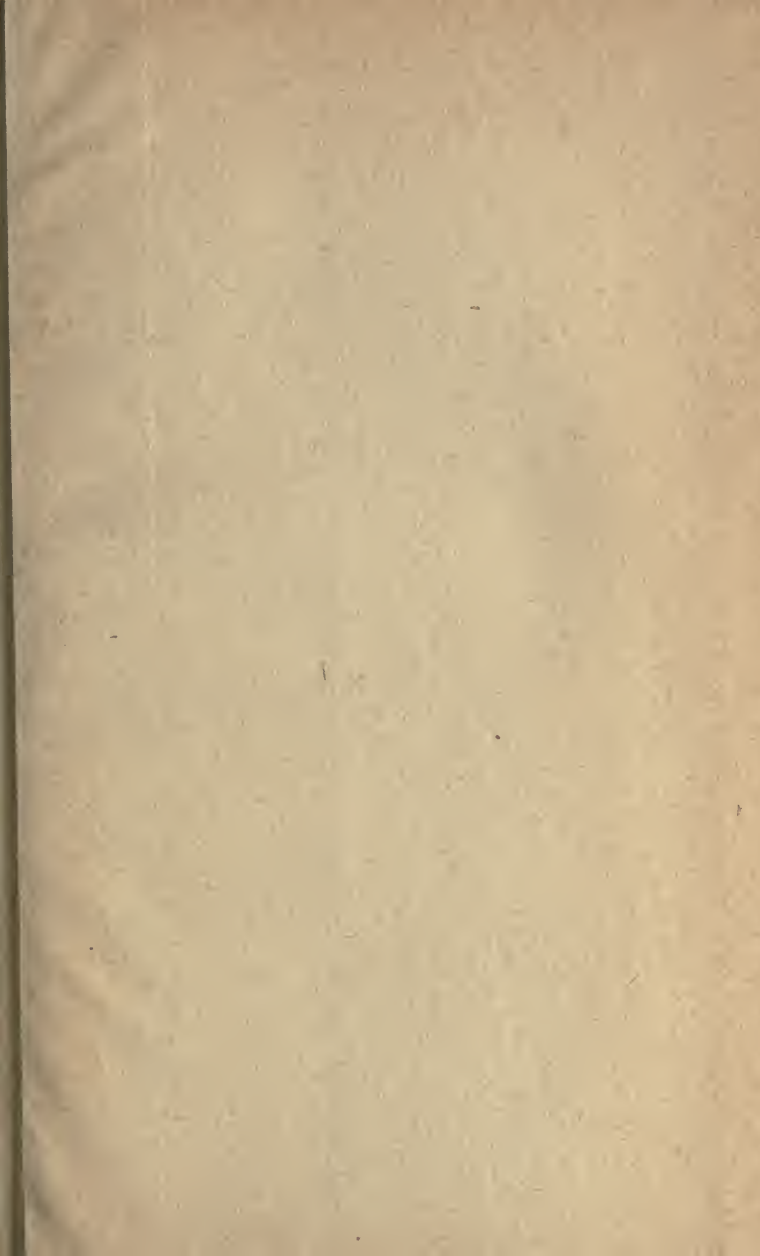
like you. It will be a nation of pioneers, with all the adventurous, toiling strain of the men and women who came over the sea and conquered the wilderness. You belong to the hunted too, and suffering has taught you.'

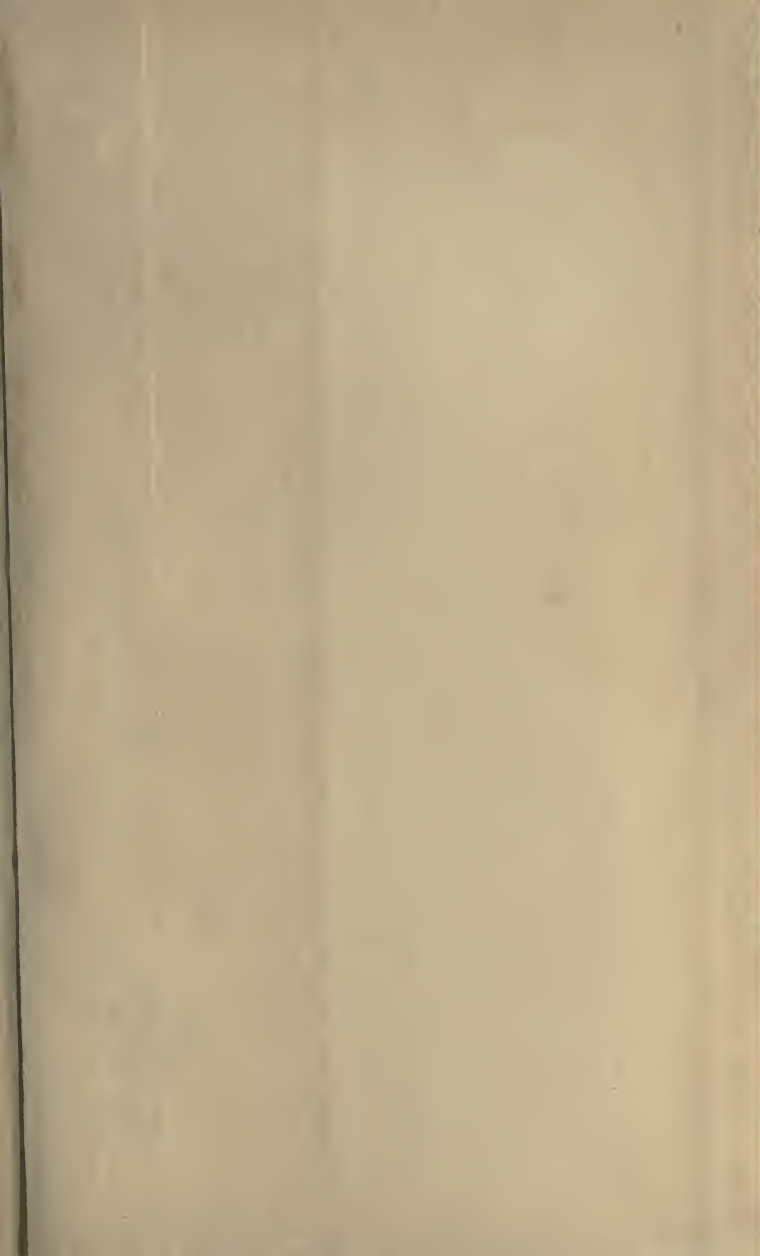
"Then she told me about prisons here in the early days, mother, and terrible stories of how people lived in the old country. 'They may talk about your birthstain by and by, Dan,' she said, 'but that will not trouble you, because it was not this country made the stain. This country has been the redeemer and blotted out all those old stains.' "

Deirdre gazing into the eager, wistful face of her son realised that he was unfolding a dream to her. She smiled into his eyes and he back to her with a consciousness of the serene understanding and sympathy between them.

" ' You will be a pioneer too, Dan,' grandmother said," the boy continued with a shy reverence, " ' a pioneer of paths that will make the world a better, happier place for everybody to live in. You will, because you won't be able to help it. There's the blood of pioneers in you.' "

THE END





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